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Maverick Mark, The Man from Nowhere.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.



MARK TURNED HIS FACE FOR A SQUARE LOOK IN THAT DIRECTION.

Maverick Mark,

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE;

OR,

The Black Jaguar of Texas.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "HIGH-WATER MARK," "OLD '49,"
"NOR'WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A RACE FOR SPORT.

"THEN you don't entirely agree with our friend Puss, Cousin Eloise?"

"On what particular point, Cousin Eugene?"

"Why, the one I heard you disputing over, of course."

"Discussing, you mean, of course," with a little bow that pointed the words she appropriated from his rather blunt sentence. "Ladies never dispute, and, whatever I may lack, never forget that Miss Zimmerman is a lady."

It would seem that there was some jest hidden beneath those words, for Eugene Cannon broke into a hearty laugh, while his companion, Miss Eloise Thornton, joined him in a bright, becoming smile. Only for a moment, however.

"Please don't, Eugene!" she pleaded, leaning over in her saddle to tap his shoulder with her riding-whip. "I mean it—really mean it! She is a lady, in the truest sense of the word. And if she lacks a little in artificial polish—"

"It is more than counterbalanced by her native worth," adroitly put in Cannon.

"Whether you mean it or not, Cousin Eugene, I've heard many a less accurate speech from your lips," laughed Eloise, as they rode over the gently undulating prairie at a walk. "Puss is a dear, good, true-hearted girl, and if she could have what she so ardently sighs for—a year or two of really good society—"

"High-toned, 'way-up, society," were her words, I believe," laughingly amended Cannon, then quickly adding: "But, never mind Miss Puss Zimmerman. What I'm the most interested in just now, is to find out how much of the argument you advanced back there came direct from your heart. You really prefer life on a stock ranch—such as ours, I mean—to life in society, Eloise?"

"I really do—at present, Cousin Eugene," came her response, but rather hesitantly.

"But not as a permanency? Just as a break in the dizzy whirl of high-toned, 'way-up society? And in a few weeks, or months, at best, you will be more than ready to go back to the city, Eloise?"

There was an unusual gravity in his tones that drew the young woman's eyes toward his face, and something she read in his steady gaze caused a bright flush to spread over her fair cheeks.

"Is my guardian so very anxious to get rid of his ward, then?" she asked, forcing a smile.

"You know that isn't it at all, Eloise. You know that the dearest wish of father's heart is—"

"Is by no means the dearest wish of his only son," swiftly interposed the young woman, touching up her spirited horse a trifle.

"Nor of his fair ward?"

"Nor of his ward, Eugene," her brown eyes frankly meeting his as their horses came nearer together, until her hand could softly touch his arm. "Like you, cousin, I would do almost anything to please the colonel, but this—it would be acting a lie which he would be first to condemn when he read the whole truth."

Eugene Cannon hung his head, frowning moodily, and for several minutes they rode on in silence side by side.

He had hardly counted on receiving a more favorable answer. Indeed, he was not sure that he really wished such. And yet it stung him far more sharply than he cared to admit, even to himself.

"There is none other, Eloise?" he asked, at length.

"None other, Cousin Eugene," came the response. "And that is why I added the proviso. With such an other to share it, I believe a life like this would be little short of paradise! I believe—"

The sentence was broken short off by her horse giving an ugly leap to one side, snorting with angry affright as a gaunt gray wolf jumped out of a patch of weeds and grass close to the edge of which the narrow, faintly-visible bridle-path led, bounding away with a harsh yelp.

Eugene gave a sharp ejaculation and reached out an unavailing arm, for such a start would have unseated many a good rider; but the young lady was hardly shaken in her seat, and instantly regained full control of her frightened mount, exclaiming:

"Oh, if the hounds were only with us now!"

The wolf was trotting off at a rapid pace, its head turned to keep a wary eye on the disturbers of its rest, its white teeth exposed in a sulky snarl. And, to one accustomed to the chase, such a wish was perfectly natural.

They were both admirably mounted, both

good riders, and a finer stretch for coursing than that almost boundless range of grazing-ground could hardly have been found elsewhere in Texas. And all who have ever tried it know that chasing "an old gray" over the open is the very acme of coursing.

As though in mockery at their lack of four-footed aids, the wolf halted only a few rods in advance, squatting on its haunches and lifting its pointed nose to emit a harsh, wailing howl.

"The insolent knave," ejaculated Cannon, sending his horse plunging ahead with a prick of the spurs, then wrenching it up as quickly, his black eyes flashing vividly as they turned upon the face of his companion. "Come, Eloise! You can't decline a challenge like that!"

"But we can't catch him without hounds?" half-asserted, half-asked the young woman, slackening the rein until her mount carried her with an eager leap to Cannon's side.

"Maybe not, but we can make it mighty interesting for— Look!" with a short, excited laugh, as the gaunt beast slunk across the swell, sending back another lugubrious howl as he vanished from sight for the moment.

Side by side the horses leaped up the gentle slope and crossed the crest, two pair of eyes looking keenly for the gray shadow. Brown eyes were quicker than black, and Eloise cried out:

"Yonder he goes, Eugene! Oh, for the hounds just now!"

"Play I'm your hound, Eloise," with a flash of the eye, as he added: "Better title than poodle, anyway. 'Ware rope, Jack Lazy!" sending forth a shrill note as of warning to the skulking wolf, letting his horse run free while his hands were busy with the neatly-coiled lariat that hung from his saddle.

By this time Eloise Thornton was fully as far committed as her escort, her cheeks flushed, her eyes aglow, every nerve tense and strained, as her inherited love of the chase conquered all other sentiments.

As so many of its kind will do when there are no hounds at hand, the wolf appeared bent on tantalizing its enemies, skulking instead of racing, gliding in zigzags as though searching for den or covert where neither was to be found, doing anything but offering an honest, tail-on-end chase from the start.

"He'll never make a run of it! Don't lasso him too soon, Eugene!" cried Eloise, yielding to those impatient tugs as her horse sought to free its head. "If 'twas only a red fox, now!"

"Does that look like too soon?" laughingly demanded Cannon, as the wolf, after an angry howl, stretched its gaunt frame out with nose and tail in line, flashing over the short, brown grass at a marvelous pace. "Give him a brush, anyway, cousin!"

"I'd rather capture him!"

With those crisp words the chase was fairly begun. Given their heads, those skillful hands keeping rein just taut enough to guard against stumble or fall through a hidden burrow, the horses dashed away after that gaunt shadow, entering into the spirit of the moment fully as keenly as their riders.

For the first few minutes the wolf seemed bent on distancing its pursuers as speedily as possible, and the interval between them grew wider with each moment, even while the blooded horses were racing at their best. But then, as though reassured by finding it "had the heels" of the company, the wolf not only slackened its pace, but lost ground by making erratic zigzags, much as it had done at the start.

"Do you see—playing with us!" ejaculated Eloise, almost angrily.

Cannon made no reply. He was not so sure of that, however, and as he cut off an angle offered, he watched the beast move closely than ever.

There was something unnatural about its movements, and that frequently-recurring howl seemed to express distress fully as much as defiance. And, surely, the brute was not running as freely as at first?

"Crowd him, Eloise!" he shouted, for the first time giving his horse a touch of the steel.

"I believe he's our meat, after all!"

From that moment the chase was hot and furious, now reaching out in a straight line, mile after mile, then veering from side to side as the wolf tried to dodge and double, vainly seeking cover sufficient to enable him to either hide from or give his enemies the slip altogether.

Paying no attention to time or distance, seeing only that gray ghost in its doubles, thinking of naught save winning the race so doubtfully begun, their horses fully as deeply interested as themselves in the outcome, the young couple pressed the wolf harder and closer, Eugene keeping his *riata* free and swinging in readiness for the cast. It was well worth the trouble, surely!

To "rope" an old gray, unhelped by hounds, after an honest chase on equal footing: that would be a gay enough feather for any man's cap!

And yet, what made the old sinner run so oddly? One side seemed dragging, unable to keep pace with the other, vaguely reminding them of a man who has felt a slight touch of paralysis. Or—

"Look out for a trick, Eloise!" cried Eugene, as the wolf actually dropped to its haunches, opening wide its narrow jaws to emit a fierce howl. "Cut him off if he tries to dodge past, for—"

If a trick, it was a suicidal one!

As Cannon urged his horse on at top speed, swinging the *riata* easily and with practiced hand, the wolf made a rush at a sharp angle for that side, as though meaning to dodge past Cannon and take the back-track.

"Play ye do when ye don't, ain't it?" laughed the young man, shrilly, as his lasso shot out in a snaky coil, the oval noose seeming to close of its own volition as the wolf appeared to thrust its head into the opening. "How's that for elevation, eh?"

Hand and horse acted together, and with a smothered howl the wolf was sent flying, heels-up, a little cloud of fluttering fur and eddying dust, bringing up again at the end of the rope with a shock that seemed sufficient to dislocate every joint in its body.

Instead, the hairy monster came flying out of the dust, jaws wide open, eyes blazing, a hoarse and husky gur-r-r-r of desperation forcing open its half-closed gullet. The first leap carried it more than half-way to the horseman, and the second sent a hairy catapult squarely against man and horse before either could fully divine their peril!

Cannon was drawing in on the *riata*, but now, dropping the rope, he instinctively flung out both hands to guard his throat from those flashing fangs. His fingers closed on the swelling muscles, but the heavy shock bent him far back in the saddle, leaving him almost helpless.

CHAPTER II.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

ALL this took place with the utmost rapidity, and it was instinct rather than reason that enabled Eugene Cannon to baffle that first mad clashing of those ugly jaws. As it was, flecks of foam flew into his blanched face, and that hot, fetid breath turned him sick for the moment.

His horse flinched, backing rapidly, tossing its head and fighting against the cruel curb, forced back by that hairy mass lying across the reins.

Eloise, taken no less by surprise, since never before had she heard of or witnessed such a desperate assault by a cornered brute, only in part kept her horse from whirling in headlong flight.

"Fight him off—for your life, Eugene!" she cried, forcing her mount to face that way, then sending it forward with whip and spur. "I'm coming to— Fight him off!"

That was far easier said than done, taken so greatly at a disadvantage as Cannon had been. His really great strength was of little avail, just then. That heavy shock had bent him back over the cantle, the pressure of which against his spine seemed to paralyze his lower limbs. Those fore-paws were clawing at his breast and ribs, those fangs were snapping almost in his face, and he knew that if they once closed upon his throat, only a miracle could save him from death!

Then, a puff of smoke blinded him, and as hot blood spouted over his face, that hairy mass was torn from his desperate grip, and he himself was nearly flung from the saddle as his horse plunged madly away.

While one hand dashed the blood from his eyes, the other swiftly brought the horse under subjection, and, once more himself, Eugene Cannon felt for a pistol as he looked back to see the wolf dragging at the end of his lariat, and Eloise trotting toward him, revolver in hand, her face pale as death, her eyes backing up her anxious voice:

"You are not— It didn't fang you?"

"Who shot—not you, Eloise?"

"Are you hurt? I didn't dare wait for a better chance, but, say you're not hurt, cousin!"

"Hurt? Not a bit of it!" forcing a laugh, but mechanically brushing a hand across his face, then looking at his soiled fingers. "And you did shoot it, Eloise?"

"Thank Heaven!" her head drooping a bit, now that the worst was over. "I thought—I feared my lead might have glanced and— Oh, Eugene! I'll never want to see another wolf as long as I live!"

His hand touched her bowed shoulders. It started to slip down about her waist, but, at that touch, Eloise swiftly rallied, drawing back and forcing a laugh that held precious little merriment in its notes.

"Don't, cousin! Well, we got it, didn't we? And, do you know," as she glanced toward the carcass lying with shattered skull in the dust, "I'm far from feeling proud over our exploit, after all!"

"You saved my life, Eloise, and—"

"You taught me how to shoot, Eugene, and I wanted to let you see the pupil was worthy of her master," once more evading his closer approach, extracting the empty shell and replacing it with a fresh cartridge. "Shake your *riata* loose. Don't touch the hideous—poor

brute!" with almost a sigh as she averted her gaze with a little shiver. "I wish we'd never run across it!"

By this time the young man had pretty well regained his usual composure, and though her evident aversion to aught like sentiment on his part stung him far more keenly than he would have believed possible, a few minutes before, he wisely fell in with her humor so far as that one point was concerned.

Reining in his horse, he alighted, turning the gaunt carcass over with his foot as he sought to free his lasso. Then he stooped lower, briefly examining the wolf, taking note of a still unhealed wound, caused by a bullet which had raked both haunch and ribs. This it was which had caused those puzzling actions during the chase.

"You're mourning over the untimely fate of this innocent creature, Eloise," he suggested.

"It had done us no harm. Or, if harm, we drove it to desperation."

"Well, I reckon you'd better spare your tears, my dear," with a smile, as he freed his lasso and gave the carcass a kick before turning to regain the saddle. "That bullet-cut tells me his pedigree, and just to lighten your conscience, I'll make you as wise. One of the boys caught the brute tearing the throat of a young colt, three days ago, and gave it that hint to quit."

"Then I'm almost glad I shot— Oh, Eugene!" giving a sudden start and pointing toward the south, where a strange cloud seemed rising above the gentle swell not far away. "What is that? A storm?"

Even before the words passed her lips, Cannon had turned in the same direction with a smothered ejaculation, his face perceptibly paling as he noticed what had escaped her attention: a faint, indescribable tremor coming like an unseen wave along the earth from the south!

At the first glance it seemed a storm-cloud just rising into view, yet with a difference which could not long escape even an uninitiated eye. Eugene Cannon had seen just such before. He had felt just such a peculiar trembling of the earth, but never before had he experienced both in such close connection.

"I'll see! Don't stir—wait here for me, Eloise!" he hastily cried, trotting briskly over to the swell from behind which that cloud was showing its crest.

A nearer look was hardly necessary to convince him of the truth. Even without the cloud, the tremor, he would have known danger was afoot, from the wild circling and excited cries of the crows and a few hawks now in the air above their heads.

He drew rein just before gaining the crest, for his face was lifted over the swell, and he could see the threatening peril plainly enough, without approaching it more nearly.

Far away, thank Heaven! And yet—was it far enough?

It looked as though a mighty whirlwind was hugging the prairie closely, spending its force in raking up and eddying the dust and bits of dry grass, with here and there a dimly visible streak of dusky red to relieve that dusty monotony.

Dust there was in plenty, but right well he knew no whirlwind was casting it aloft. Unless it might be the whirlwind of death!

He turned to cast a glance backward along the course they must take to regain the ranch and safety, flinching a bit as Eloise came trotting briskly to his side.

She cast one keen look toward that ominous cloud, then spoke in slightly awed tones:

"Is it a prairie fire, Eugene?"

"That, and worse!" he almost harshly muttered, wrenching his horse around, yet using his eyes like one partly bewildered. "We've had a race for fun, Eloise, but now—it's come down to a race for life!"

"Then there really is danger?"

"Heap sight more than I like to admit, for your sake, cousin!"

His left hand tightened on her rein, close to the bit, and the two horses sprung off in a swift gallop, heading almost due north.

Eloise said nothing as she settled herself firmly in the saddle. Her face was a bit paler than ordinary, but in that alone she betrayed aught of fear. Let the worst come to worst, and she could face death without an outward tremor.

"What is that—again?" she ejaculated, a little while later. "It feels like—like what I imagine an earthquake must feel, at its beginning, Eugene!"

"You noticed that, too?" spoken like one hardly conscious of his own words, his gaze sweeping from side to side as they swept along over the gently undulating prairie.

"There—again! What does it mean, Eugene?"

"It means death, unless we can keep out of its way!" replied the young ranchman, still with that puzzled glancing to and fro.

He had been so utterly absorbed in the wolf-chase that he had taken note of neither time nor direction while that race lasted. Under different circumstances he would not have been at a loss for a moment, but now he found it hard to locate their position, mainly because he

refused to recognize the truth when it forced itself upon his brain.

In striving to convince himself he was wrong, he spoke without thought, much as he might have done had his companion been a strong man like himself.

Eloise gazed at him intently as they dashed along over the prairie, and she did him injustice in her thoughts. She felt that he was losing at least a portion of his usual nerve in the face of danger, and that belief helped her to banish the vague terror which that strange earth-trembling had inspired.

A quick twitch set her reins free from his controlling grasp, and sending her horse a little to one side, she spoke clearly:

"As the colonel would say—brace up, Eugene! Look matters squarely in the face, and tell me just what's the trouble. Now give me the very worst, Cousin Eugene!"

He dashed a hand across his eyes, took one more swift, comprehensive glance, then muttered:

"So far! Who'd have thought it?"

"So far from what, man?" impatiently demanded the young woman.

"From the trail—from home, of course! Curse that wolf! Only for that, we'd never have fallen into this trap!"

"What sort of trap is it, Eugene?" her whip stinging the arm nearest to her. "In one word: what's behind us?"

"You saw: fire!"

"If only fire, what are we racing for? There is no gale, and, short of that, what could drive a fire over this nearly bare prairie swiftly enough to endanger life? You are trying to hide the truth, Eugene."

"If I am, it's for your sake, Eloise!"

"Then, for my sake, come out with the whole truth! I'm not a child. I can face danger well—for a weak woman."

There was a half-sneer in her tones, but Cannon did not feel it just then. Half-turning in the saddle, he glanced backward, to catch his breath sharply at what he saw.

Only for an instant, then the dusky veil dropped once more. But in that same instant Eloise saw enough to read the riddle for herself.

"I thought as much!" she said, giving her horse free rein once more. "It is what you call—a stampede, Eugene?"

"Worse luck—just that!"

The young woman actually laughed.

"Bad enough, no doubt, but it might have been worse. We're mounted, not afoot on the prairie. And surely we can outpace any common herd of ponies."

"If our nags were fresh; but, look at them!"

Eloise was horsewoman enough to take in his full meaning. Though running at ease, requiring no urging, their horses were dripping with sweat, and she could see how tucked-up were the flanks of her cousin's mount.

"They are good for several miles, and surely we're not more than that away from the road!"

"I wish we weren't!" with almost a groan. "We're good twenty miles, if a rod! So I say, curses on that wolf for leading us astray!"

Eloise took another look backward. She could see the front of the stampede with tolerable distinctness now, and a thrill of terror shot through her frame as she tried to guess how rapidly the maddened animals must have gained upon them in that brief space of time.

"Is there no refuge—no way of avoiding them but a race?" she asked, pale to the lips, but otherwise showing rare nerve.

"Only by clearing them to one side," was his swift reply, once more grasping her rein. "Steady! you must let me, I say!" almost fiercely, as Eloise sought to free the leather. "A trip or a stumble now would mean certain death to us both! Sit firm and pray that the front may not be a very wide one."

CHAPTER III.

A PRAIRIE FREE LANCE.

WHILE uttering these words, Eugene Cannon changed their course and headed nearly north-east, hoping by this means to gradually work clear of the stampede by gaining one side, while at the same time holding their lead sufficiently to keep clear of the fatal crush.

Eloise raised no objection, submitting to his greater experience, a half-dazed look in her dark eyes as they flashed around, vainly trying to recognize some landmark by which her sense of locality might be awakened.

Twenty miles! Surely Eugene must be mistaken as to that! Hotly as they had pressed the chase, that crippled wolf could not have drawn them so far from home!

Now that the very worst had been told, Cannon both looked and spoke more naturally.

"We'll pull through," he said, while casting frequent glances backward, like one studying the position they occupied in relation to the front of the stampede. "As long as we keep saddle, and our nags don't stumble, we're all right."

"Even though we are overtaken, Eugene?"

"Even then," flashing a swift glance into her

face, then as quickly looking away again. "But, we'll not be caught up."

"Then we've got to let out another link," calmly decided the maiden, her own eyes flashing backward for a single breath. "The line is gaining on us, Eugene. I can make out horses in the lead, and that's more than I could do five minutes ago."

Cannon looked backward again, as though to decide for himself. It was only to hide his face from those bright eyes. Right well he knew the truth, and only too well he knew that yonder line of fear-maddened animals must come closer before that interval grew greater.

How wide was its front? Had all the range animals flocked together to form that stampede? Truly, it looked that way!

"Is it faster, cousin?" persisted Eloise, as no answer came.

"Not yet. Wait. If there was only more wind!"

They were now speeding over a vast stretch of ground which lay almost as level as a board floor, far as the unaided eye could reach, when turned ahead. To right and left were gentle waves of land, though the speeding eye could hardly distinguish them. But, even there, no cover could be found—naught which could be utilized as a shield against those thundering hoofs—nothing which could split that living tide and leave them safe in its midst.

Even as they dashed on, they could feel the earth trembling beneath them, telling them only too plainly what a mighty force must lie back of that rolling cloud of dust, backed by the black smoke of a grass fire. Only the first wave of that living avalanche could be distinguished, but that was enough; far away to right and left it extended, and the end seemed no nearer now than when they took their first diagonal leap.

"They are gaining slowly, but surely, Eugene!" cried Eloise, after a brief silence. "Surely we are giving them too great an advantage by angling—What is it, cousin?"

For Cannon rose as high as possible in his stirrups, peering ahead with almost fierce eagerness. And then, grinding a curse between his teeth, he jerked both horses partly around, urging them on with more reckless speed.

"What is it?" he echoed, almost savagely, flashing a brief look into that fair face. "Nothing—much. Only we've got to—"

"Steady, as you were!" came a sharp, clear call across the plain at that juncture. "Right oblique, pardner!"

"Look! a man!" cried Eloise, first to make the discovery, her whip flying up to point in the direction they had just diverged from.

To her it seemed as though that mounted figure was rising up out of the level ground, but then she knew better; it came from beyond a prairie swell, where the land must lie lower, to have so long concealed that tall horse and taller rider.

"You're heading wrong, friend!" the stranger added, rapidly drawing nearer, his free hand pointing nearly in the direction they had taken before that sudden change. "This way, for your lives!"

"For death, you'd better say!" harshly returned Cannon, his own horse baffling the impulse which Eloise gave hers. "Straight on, girl! It's our only hope of life, I tell you!"

"Not if you look at matters through my spectacles, Cannon!" quickly added the other horseman, his words clearer as his good horse bore its master closer. "You don't want to clean forget horse nature, while counting your chances. They're a good deal like sheep in one respect: it's follow my leader, through thick and thin!"

"You don't—Maverick Mark!"

"Yours to command, Mr. Cannon!" at the same time touching his hat and bowing to Miss Thornton. "Looks ugly, back yonder, don't it?"

"It looked still uglier ahead, when I made out just where we were, though," grimly declared Cannon, that momentary gleam of pleasure fading from his blood-stained face.

"You'd never ought to have changed; but, it's not too late. Right oblique, and we'll have the last laugh on our side, after all!"

"Man alive! don't you know—"

"It's just because I do know that I say make an angle!" sharply interposed the other.

"To the left, then! It means sure death to the right!"

"You've got the two all mixed up, pardner," in lighter tones, turning partly in his saddle to scan that on-rolling wave of death. "You reckon you can clear the *barranca* by veering to the left?"

"We've got to do it or— Ride, not chatter!"

"I knew it! Follow my leader! Will you look back, Cannon, and tell me just what you see?"

Almost mechanically Eugene obeyed, so far as looking backward was concerned. And, his senses sharpened by those significant words, he saw far more than he wished or could welcome.

Even this soon the leaders in that stampede had turned their heads direct for the fugitives!

"Just so they'd follow you if you headed the *barranca*, Cannon!" declared Maverick Mark, noting the savage despair which forced its way into the younger man's face. "Just so they'll

make you their leaders until— There's only one way, I tell you. *To the right!*"

"'Twould be sure death, man! We can't round the ditch that way."

"We can do better, though! We can cross it, can't we?"

"If we had time to pick a favorable point—but we haven't. It's too late for that, man!"

"Not if the lady will trust me," coolly asseverated Maverick Mark, with a keen glance into that pale but composed face.

"If there is a chance—"

"There's more than a chance, if we don't throw it away by idle dispute. I can and will do the trick, if you'll agree to follow my orders to the very letter, ma'am."

"Can you promise more, Cousin Eugene?"

"I wish I could promise half as much," gloomily.

"Then give way! Lead on, sir, and we'll follow. What comes first?"

"Good enough!" the words accompanied by a smile, as he veered sharply to the right. "Follow suit, and keep close up. It'll come hard on your nags, but they've got another link of speed left in 'em, or looks lie. Steady! Feel their mouths, but no more: just to be on the safe side in case they break through a gopher-hole."

Despite the great peril which menaced them all, Eloise Thornton could not avoid feeling a thrill of admiration as the strangely named fellow dashed on in the lead. Never before had she met a more perfect specimen of manly grace, strength and nerve.

Taller than the average of men, broad-shouldered, trim-waisted, long-limbed, riding like a centaur, Maverick Mark formed her beau ideal of a prairie free lance.

Even in those moments of excitement and peril she saw that he was more than ordinarily good-looking, and, while his garb, half-cowboy, half-Mexican, was of coarse material, and might have looked ugly on another, on his lithe and muscular figure it seemed perfection.

The dun horse was a fitting match for its master, and though they were now going at speed, she could see that, if so ordered, the yellow steed could have distanced even her own noble pinto with ease.

For nearly another mile that race for life continued without a word from either of the trio. Maverick Mark cast frequent glances back toward the front of that terrible stampede, but there was no shade of fear to be seen on his face. He even spoke lightly, as he said:

"We're gaining ground, friends! Blood will tell, sure enough!"

"It can't last much longer, though!" spoke up Cannon.

"Then we'll make the most of what time we have left. A bit faster, please. So! another mile will settle it."

"And us, too, worse luck!"

"Don't you believe it, pardner. All we need is a few yards for leeway, and— You can take a jump, ma'am?" turning sharply toward Eloise.

"Anything that my horse can, sir," was the cool response. "And I've never yet met one that could defeat him at leaping."

"Then we're all right," confidently, as he glanced at the white horse ridden by Eugene. "I know you're on a jumper, pardner, unless that's the ghost of the nag the colonel used to ride?"

"It's the same horse, but—"

"He's tired, I can see, yet not too much for what's in front. Still, better slacken a bit, and give him time to catch a free breath. We can afford it, thanks to the ground we've gained. Steady, so!"

Again Eloise felt that thrill of admiration. Surely never was a man with stronger, steadier nerves! To look and talk so easily in the face of such peril! It was grand!

"You see how it is," added Maverick Mark, after another glance to the rear. "We've distanced the main body of the stampede, but there's horses enough to trample down and over a regiment of cavalry. They're dead sure to follow us, as their leaders, unless we can place an impassable barrier between. There's only the *barranca* that can stop them."

"If you haven't made a mistake!" broke in Eugene, despite himself. "I don't know of a spot this way where a horse can leap it, even while at its best. Ours— Hear them pant!"

"Don't croak, cousin!" almost angrily protested Eloise. "I am sure Mr. Marks knows what he is doing!"

"I ought to," with an amused smile as he caught the name given him. "A mistake would forfeit my own life, as well. Of course that's hardly worth counting, but— Ready, ma'am?"

"Ready!" promptly cried Eloise, settling herself in the saddle.

"Good! It looks selfish, but I've got to show the way, you know, and if either horse flunks, I'll be back to try another trick. Now, follow me straight as a die! Watch where I take off, and do the same. It's for dear life, remember!"

"Show me the way, and I'll answer for the rest!" answered Eloise, though she looked ahead in vain for aught like a ravine or gulch. The prairie stretched out level and smooth as far as the eye could reach, yet— Ha! she began to see it now!

"You first, Cannon next!" cried Maverick Mark, sending his horse forward in a marvelous burst of speed. "Cool and steady does it! Hold up a bit, Cannon!"

Even as those words were spoken, the yellow horse rose in the air like a bird, floating across the *barranca*, there full twenty feet from brink to brink, alighting with safety with several feet to spare. In less than twice its own length, the noble creature was checked and turned, its master uttering an encouraging shout as Eloise pressed forward to take the leap, actually smiling as her dark eyes met his glowing gaze.

Squarely in the tracks of Maverick Mark's dun, rose the dappled bay, seeming to dwell for an instant in mid-air, then alighting safe and firm on the other level!

"Glorious!" cried Maverick Mark. "Now, Cannon, is your time. Back, and take a fair start for— *Back, man alive!*"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE.

UNFORTUNATELY there was only too good cause for that sharp, almost angry cry.

Through all that adventure Eugene Cannon had hardly done himself justice, no doubt because he felt that through his own reckless actions he had placed a precious life in sore peril.

There may have been a spice of jealousy in it, too, for he had not let those glances of mingled wonder and admiration entirely escape him, and he was not too greatly excited to realize the unfavorable contrast which Eloise might easily draw between his actions and those of the prairie free lance who had so opportunely joined them.

Yet it was anxiety for her safety that led him to keeping close at the heels of his cousin's horse when the test came, wrenching up his own mount when the dapple bay rose to the leap.

Then, with Eloise in safety so far as the *barranca* between could insure it, all would have gone well had he drawn back far enough to get his jaded horse into its full stride before calling upon its leaping powers.

True, the head of the stampede was drawing perilously nigh, but there was ample room for such a wise precaution. Only—he gave the white horse the steel, and came rushing at the *barranca*, even as Maverick Mark sent forth that warning cry.

Had his mount been perfectly fresh, all might have been well as it was. Time and again the young ranchero had made wider leaps than this. And even now, had not the tired creature stumbled just when at its own length from the brink—

"Steady! Up and over!" fiercely shouted Cannon, lifting his horse to the leap, driving spurs deep into those steaming, tucked-up flanks.

Never creature made a nobler effort!

Its nostrils dilated, its eyes wildly protruding, every nerve on the strain, yet quivering in each fiber, the white horse rose in the air, but striking out wildly with its fore feet, its head flung up as never a horse carried head while making a natural leap!

Swift as thought Maverick Mark leaped from his saddle, touching ground and darting forward just as the white horse cleared the gulch, striking firm ground with its fore feet, but breaking away the brink with its fiercely struggling hind hoofs and legs!

"Clear your feet and jump, man!" cried Maverick Mark, shrilly, as he saw the white horse sink behind, so suddenly that its rider was almost flung backward from his seat. "Now—for life, man!"

He caught a hand as Eugene flung out an arm to recover his balance, and as the white horse sunk lower, giving a choking snort of terror and fright, his other hand clutched the arm, tearing the young man clear of the saddle as his mount fell back and down to a cruel death on the bare rocks far below!

Hardly one out of a hundred strong men could have withstood that heavy strain as Cannon dropped after his horse, but with a mighty effort Maverick Mark jerked the endangered ranchero upward and flung him backward without a look in that direction, as he drew his pistols and opened fire on the horses across the *barranca*, though he cried aloud:

"Back, girl! Ride back out of danger, for if they start to cross over— Back, for dear life!"

True to their instincts, the leaders of the herd came thundering on, blindly following the riders, already within pistol-shot of the as yet unseen *barranca*.

Swift as thought Maverick Mark worked his sixes, sending a double stream of bullets into their front, dropping more than one of their number, but without in the least checking that mad rush.

Not until the foremost animals sprung headlong into the death-gulch did there come a show of hesitation, of shrinking, and had not a stinging bullet caused one of them to turn sharply to the right, even then that death-chase might have continued.

But, as that wounded creature wheeled, with a shrill scream of pain, its fellows also turned,

making it their leader, thundering away as blindly as before!

"That does settle it!" cried Mark, as he replaced the empty shells with fresh cartridges. "I don't ask for anything better than 'follow my leader,' as long as we're not in the van!"

"Only for you, Mark, there's where we'd be now!" impulsively cried Cannon, coming forward with extended hands. "Or worse!" with an involuntary shudder, as he cast a glance toward Eloise Thornton.

"Never mention it, pardner," returned the other, replacing his weapons, but still watching the stampede. "I was caught in the same trap, remember, and I couldn't save myself without letting you see how the trick was to be turned. So—didn't I tell you so, man?"

The cattle which formed by far the greater part of the stampede, had already veered to the right, following the fleeing horses.

Cannon cast a glance toward the left, where several of the herd had actually managed to leap the barrier before that sudden and fortunate turn had taken place. He said nothing, but Mark seemed to possess the power of reading thoughts, and remarked:

"'Twas good luck that helped us out, I'm free to admit, pardner. If the piebald hadn't turned just as he did, we might have found it too crowded over here for comfort. But—"

"You saved our lives, sir," said Eloise, alighting and coming forward, both hands extended, her beautiful face lighted up with gratitude. "If words are powerless to express what we owe you, neither can they cloak your brave generosity. I don't know how to thank you, but—I am truly grateful!"

Mark flushed hotly, and even shrunk back a pace, but the spirited maiden would not have it so. She caught his hand between both of hers, pressing it gratefully. And her glorious brown eyes gave him the thanks her lips could not shape.

"You are too kind. I didn't do anything but—"

"Is saving our lives nothing, Mr. Marks?"

His involuntary laugh was drowned by the increasing noise of the clattering of thousands of split-hoofs as the cattle swung closer to the *barranca* in trying to change their course to follow the herd of horses. And, as here and there showed other horses, Mark drew swiftly away from Eloise, calling out sharply to Cannon:

"Take the lady back, pardner! Stand by the horses, ready to make a run for it if those brutes try to swarm over! Once started, they'd fill the ditch, and use the carcasses as a bridge!"

It was an awesome spectacle, even yet. Nearer crowded the mighty mass, packed almost to suffocation as they struggled to make the turn, while others in the rear pressed them ahead. And a number of the fear-maddened brutes were precipitated into the *barranca* before the worst was over and all were swinging around to the right in unison.

Through all this Maverick Mark stood on the brink of the *barranca*, pistol in readiness for use should the occasion arise. And because he had for the instant entirely forgotten her very existence while facing that peril, Eloise Thornton watched the gallant fellow with steadily-growing admiration for his manhood and unselfishness.

Maverick Mark caught something of that expression as he turned abruptly, when the peril was passed. His face flushed a bit, and he seemed almost abashed as he hurried over to where his horse stood in waiting.

"I'll rope you a mount in a minute, Cannon," he cried, vaulting into the saddle and unslinging his neatly-coiled lariat, trotting off toward the horses which had succeeded in crossing the *barranca*, and which were now standing with drooping heads, panting heavily, yet clearly up to further work if called upon.

Eloise glanced around in search of her cousin, but he was leaning over the brink of the *barranca*, gazing downward in search of what remained of his good horse. But vainly. Other bodies had covered it over, and he knew that even his saddle was destroyed.

Eloise watched Mark as he set about capturing one of the horses, his yellow steed as fresh as though just from its stall, putting each creature into motion, showing its pace while easily keeping them hemmed in on one side by the *barranca*.

Making a selection was easy enough for such a good judge of horseflesh, and singling out a clean-limbed half-breed, Maverick Mark soon had it roped and under subjection.

Deftly shaping the *riata* into a "hackamore," he leaped upon the animal's back, putting it through its paces with rare skill, yet plainly innocent of any intention of "showing off" before those lustrous eyes.

"He's plenty good enough until we can find a better, pardner," observed Mark, trotting up to where the young people stood waiting. "And, if you don't mind, just mount my critter, please; we'll be making for the ranch. The colonel—"

"Eugene, must I ask Mr. Marks to introduce himself?" almost impatiently cried Eloise, stamping her little foot as she stood by her horse.

"I thought he had pretty thoroughly intro-

duced himself!" laughed Cannon, but adding: "Miss Eloise Thornton, this is our best friend, Maverick Mark. May we never—that is—confound it all, Mark! don't laugh at a poor devil just because he's all mixed up!"

"Mr. Marks—"

"Excuse me, Miss Thornton," with a bow that failed to hide his half-mischievous smile. "Simply Mark—Maverick Mark, a waif and stray, whom no one has thought worth the trouble of branding with a more Christian name. In fact, ma'am," smiling frankly in response to her puzzled look, "I'm just nobody, from nowhere."

"Call him the Man from Nowhere, if you find Mark too harsh a mouthful, Eloise," suggested Cannon, at the same time managing to give her a warning look that checked the words already shaping on her tongue. "Come, your foot, cousin! It's growing late, and we're still a long ways from home."

"There's far more truth than poetry in the title, Miss Thornton," soberly declared Mark, as they cantered on in the direction of the Cannon Ranch. "I am truly a waif from no one knows whence, without even a name that I can rightly call my own. Of course I must have had parents, like all others, but I never knew mother or father, brother or sister. If a drop of my blood runs in other veins, I know not where to look for it!"

"They lose far more than you do, those unknown kindred!" impulsively answered Eloise, a hand going out as if to touch his arm.

If so, it failed to make connection. As of its own accord, the half-wild creature which Maverick Mark had insisted on riding for the present, shied violently, and before its rider could soothe it down, the chance was forever lost.

"Well, Cannon," said the free lance, seemingly glad to drop the personal subject then and there, "I reckon you'll find it plain sailing from here to your home."

"You surely will bear us company, sir?" interposed Eloise, her manner leaving no room for doubting her perfect sincerity. "You must! The colonel will be anxious to add his thanks to ours, and—"

"One more reason why I'd better wait for that gratitude to cool a bit," urged Mark. "Then, too, I've work on hand which—I say, Cannon," drawing near the young man, quickly adding in guarded tones, yet not low enough to escape Miss Thornton's quick ears: "Tell the colonel that the Black Jaguar has broken loose again, will you?"

"What! you surely don't mean that—not here?"

"It looks that way, but I'll not say for certain. It looks as if the gang had started this stampede as a cover to—well, you ought to come as near guessing the truth as I can," breaking off abruptly. "I'm going to find out just how that stampede did start, if I can!"

The young men quickly changed mounts, and once more declining the invitation given by Eloise to bear them company, Maverick Mark added:

"Don't forget, pardner. The Black Jaguar has broken loose, and means mischief of the nastiest sort—sure!"

CHAPTER V.

A FLAG OF DISTRESS.

A TOUCH of the rein gave Yellow Boy the signal to go, but before he could take advantage of the permission, Eloise Thornton sent her bay in front of the Man from Nowhere, speaking earnestly:

"Say you will come; if not now, later? You will not go away without calling at the ranch? Promise!"

"You might as well, pardner," interjected Cannon. "It's the queen's command, and you'll never break away until she has her own sweet will!"

"Promise—please!"

The strong contrast between those two words, or rather the manner of their utterance, sent a warm flush over the young man's face, and as their eyes met, he bowed assent.

"I will come, if living, Miss Thornton."

The bay horse backed, the yellow horse sprung ahead, rapidly bearing its master away over the prairie in a line which would soon be intersected by the barranca.

For once in his life Maverick Mark was "going it blind," leaving Yellow Boy to care for his rider as well as himself. For the moment all else was forgotten: all save that wondrously musical voice, that fair face, that superb figure.

"Promise—please?"

Who wouldn't, with that sweetly coaxing echo in his ears, backed by those eloquent eyes? One such plea would justify a man in plunging through liquid fire just to—

"Steady, boy!" rung out the voice of Mark, bringing the dun horse down to a gentle amble on the instant. Its master sighed as he bent forward to caressingly pat that arching neck.

"Not you, old fellow," he muttered, with something like a return of his usual gay recklessness. "You're steady as a rock, and true as

the pole-star! You're not given to chasing will-o'-the-wisps, even in your dreams! You're not likely to—nor is your master, old fellow!"

Almost defiantly came that decision, and lifting his hat, Maverick Mark tossed back his long hair, flinging out his arms and expanding his superb chest like one casting off an oppressing incubus.

A glance around settled his position, and turning slightly to the right, so as to strike the barranca nearer its upper end, Mark once more gave Yellow Boy his head, covering ground at a rapid rate, though that long, swinging lope was hardly more tiring than a walking pace.

It was an easy matter to declare that he would not, yet Maverick Mark kept thinking of Eloise Thornton, his memory reproducing each change of face, of figure, of voice, even, from the time of their first meeting to their recent parting. And once more he heard that soft, prolonged "p-le-a-s-e!" Once more he saw that earnest glow in those glorious brown eyes as Eloise waited for his pledge.

"She meant it, too!" he muttered, giving a slight start at the sound of his own voice. "What of it? Don't you turn silly in your old age, my boy! Don't you forget your own level, and invite a broken neck—or heart!—by trying to scale an impregnable height! Steady, I say! Take a square look at both sides of the shield, old fellow!"

"What is she? An angel for looks, of course, but what is she? A lady of birth and breeding, fit to shine in the highest circles. What are you, old fellow? A maverick, without pedigree! An estray, not worth any man's trouble to claim! An off-cast from the main herd, too proud to run with the ruck, too poor to play king of the range!"

"And yet, she meant all she said and looked, just then! Steady, once more! Of course she did, for you'd just saved her life. She meant it then; she might even mean it as late as tomorrow! But show her proud and dainty ladyship even the shadow of the fool-fancies those brown eyes have given birth to in your crack-brain, Maverick, if you really wish to see how quickly frost can follow sunshine!"

There was a touch of bitterness in the tone, but Mark succeeded in banishing those curious thoughts for the present, as he sent Yellow Boy along the edge of the barranca, sweeping the plain beyond with keen, practiced eyes.

It would be entirely too much to say that he had "fallen in love" with Eloise Thornton, although he had been strongly impressed by her beauty, her skill in the saddle, and, above all, by her nerve in the face of unusual danger. It was an appreciation which might easily deepen into love, and Maverick Mark was accustomed to looking ahead, noting each obstacle in his life trail, and deciding how best to surmount them.

This was not his first trip to that part of Texas, as his prompt decision when so hard pressed by the stampeding animals proved. He had spent more than one night under the roof which now sheltered Eloise Thornton, though that was before her coming to Texas to live.

He knew Colonel Creed Cannon fairly well. He knew his son, Eugene, even better. He had heard, in an idle, gossiping manner, of the rich young lady whom young Cannon was soon to install as mistress of the vast domain locally known as the "Handcuff Ranch."

(How the proud colonel roared when he first learned of the manner in which his "brand" had been corrupted! The initials of his name, the first C reversed, a bar connecting the letters, thus: C—C.)

With an effort Maverick Mark cast aside all such thoughts, giving his whole attention to solving the puzzle suggested by that stampede.

"Was it an accident? If not, did the brutes get the upper hand of the stampedeers, running north in place of south? Or, if they meant it should be so, what foul trick is it meant to cover over?"

Questions easily asked, but not so readily answered. There was a mystery lying hard by, and Mark resolved to get at the bottom facts if any one man could.

He skirted the barranca until beyond the western limit of that mad stampede, easily enough recognized by the thin layer of black ashes where the prairie fire had worked its will unhampered. Then, selecting a narrowing stretch, he sent Yellow Boy flying across the gulch, loping steadily along the edge of that deeply scored stretch of ground.

His eyes were busy, now scanning the ground before them, now ranging far ahead and to the left, searching for riders, whether friendly or foemen. For a stampede so extensive as this one had been, surely must have sent men to saddle in hot haste.

"I'm on the wrong side, I reckon," Mark reflected, as mile after mile was covered without making any discovery. "That horse bore Zimmermann's brand, and his boys would naturally—Steady, Yellow!"

A touch of the loose rein brought the clay-bank to an abrupt halt, its master tiptoeing in the stirrups and shading his eyes with a curved palm against the sun as he gazed keenly ahead and to the left.

A fluttering object had caught his eyes, but the descending sun baffled even his keen vision for the moment.

"A flag of some sort, but—distress, or decoy?"

Yellow Boy shot ahead at a smooth, level run, Mark guiding him by knee-pressure alone, his hands being busy with his pistols.

"Distress, for a big round dollar!" he muttered, as his line of vision was altered, showing him a wildly-waving—was it shirt? And now he could make out the head and shoulders of a human being rising above the hoof-marked ground.

"Just hold your breath another second, pardner!" muttered the Man from Nowhere, sending the dun horse ahead and gently curving to the left at the same time. "If you're white, it'll come all the sweeter for delay, and if you're trying to play tricks on travelers, your reward will weigh just as heavy!"

That flag had been lifted from just across a gentle rise in the ground, but Mark knew that a score of enemies could find cover for both man and horse behind that swell, and where all doubts could be solved in a couple of minutes, he was not the man to take chances.

Yellow Boy quickly carried him to and over that swell, at long rifle-range from that flag, and then, for the first time, Mark turned his face for a square look in that direction.

"Only one fellow, and he'd make but a mouthful!" he grimly remarked, heading straight for the frantically-signaling man. "Hellow, pardner! what's biting you?" he sent his voice in advance.

The flag dropped to the ground, the hand that had been wielding it gave a glad flourish, then its owner sunk at length along the bare earth, lying like one utterly exhausted or badly injured.

"Looking mighty rocky, stranger!" cried Mark, drawing rein while a few yards distant, springing lightly to the ground and walking forward. "Had a tumble, maybe?"

"Bet I did!" huskily uttered the man, lifting his head, moving like one in pain, his dusty, smoke blackened face looking haggard. "Most critters would when called this-a-way, don't ye reckon?"

A finger gingerly touched his right breast, where his woollen shirt showed damp and sticky, with something more than sweat.

"Didn't shoot yourself, pardner?"

"Do I look such a dug-gun fool?" half-angrily snapped the cowboy. "How's the stampede? Still a-goin'? Cuss the crooked luck that laid me out when— I say, pardner!"

"Let saying go until I take a look at that hurt, my boy," interposed Mark, all doubts banished now that he had a fair look at the wounded man. "Grit your teeth if it hurts you, but I'll be as easy as I know how."

The cowboy submitted in silence, giving a low grunt as the amateur surgeon at length declared:

"No bones broken, and a clean hole with two ends to it! You'll be on deck, ready for duty, inside of two weeks, pardner!"

"I'd be thar now ef the tumble hedn't knocked me endways! While I was snoozin', the blood was leakin', ye see. And it sorter weakens a body, don't ye know, fer to be dreened that-a-way!"

"I should say so!" with a glance at the blood-thickened dust, where the poor fellow had lain until aroused by the prospect of assistance. "Looks as though you'd pulled the bung out of a full barrel!"

"Durn me! I'm thinkin' most o' the stock. Even ef 'twas jest a common stampede, 'twould knock all the profits off, but it's wuss!"

"Rustlers, you reckon?"

"Say I know!" with gloomy rage. "Never see a cleaner trick in all my days! Hosses kivered with dry hides an' horns an' blowed-up bladders full o' stones, or sich! An' every dug-gun imp a-yelpin' fit to split a brass thrapple! An' then, waal, I done my level best as long's they'd let me try."

"You saw the break-away, then?"

"From pritty nigh the len'th o' my eyesight, pardner," assured the wounded cowboy, watching those nimble fingers as they deftly banded his hurt as best they might with the few materials to hand. "Heap sight too far off to do ar'ything but jest edge in an' try fer to mill the critters. An' me by my lonesome self, wuss luck!"

Busy though his hands were, Mark took note of each word, filling out the brief sentences with surmises of his own, suggested by past experience in such matters.

Unless the cowboy was mistaken, one of his theories must give way; that stampede surely could not have been started with the intention of running the frightened stock over the border, else the Rustlers would never have headed them to the north.

"If so far away, how came they to drill you?" he asked, slowly.

"Them? They didn't! Jest run head-fu't into 'nother gang, over yen' way," with a nod toward the blackened stretch of prairie. "Tuck 'em fer some o' the boys, in the mighty dust, an' hollered fer help to mill the stock. Then—waa!

jest as I see what they looked like, down I come, with a hole clean through me!"

"White or yellow?"

"Yaller, pardner. Greasers from top to toe! An' then—I say!"

"Well?"

"Mebbe you'll think I'm cracked, but, pardner, thar was a woman in the outfit!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN IN THE CASE.

MARK gave a sudden start, drawing back to gaze keenly into that begrimed face, his own eyes aglow with sudden emotion of a sort difficult to describe, just then.

"You're dead sure 'twas a woman, pardner?" he asked.

"Sure as sure," nodded the cowboy. "I see her plain as I see you this minnit. She was straddle, man-fashion, but no man ever kerried a shape like that!"

"Steady a bit. Take time to think. Try and call back what you saw, and tell me if 'twas anything like this."

Maverick Mark paused for a brief space, brushing a hand slowly across his eyes as though to clear his mental vision. Then, speaking deliberately, he said:

"Was this woman tall as the average man? Taller than nineteen out of every twenty women? Was she dark of skin, yet handsome beyond the ordinary? Was she middle-aged or past, and—"

"Stiddy, pardner!" interposed the cowboy, shaking his head vigorously. "You're 'way off the trail. She was nigher bein' a gal jest growin' ripe. Nur she wasn't tall. Ef ary thing, she was weentier'n the bunch."

"Young, and short?" echoed Maverick Mark, his brows contracting. "You are dead sure?"

"Dead sure, pardner!"

"But the dust—you said the dust was very thick, and that might have fooled you. And then, you could hardly have had time to look very closely, if they downed you before you could make a score for yourself. Think again, my boy!"

"No need, I tell ye, pardner," with a dogged shake of the head, his eyes closing before a wave of faintness. "I see it all, jest as I tell ye. She was a young woman. Purty as a pictur, too! Her ha'r was yaller as gold, flying out in the wind as she rid up, an' I ketched a glimp' o' two blue eyes—the sky never was bluer'n them, I tell ye!"

"Yet you say they were Mexicans?"

"I say it over, boss. They was Greasers. An' ef the gal wasn't, then she tuck mightily to thar ways, fer she was ridin' straddle."

Right or wrong, the wounded man firmly believed all he asserted, and Maverick Mark at once gave over seeking a change of opinion. This was far from answering the description he hoped to obtain of the woman Rustler, but he was forced to rest content.

By this time he had completed his care for the hurt, so far as his limited means would admit. He knew that the poor fellow was suffering severely from pain, as well as from loss of the vital fluid; and while he was anxious to solve this fresh mystery if possible, he could not bear to leave the cowboy there in his helplessness.

"You can sit a horse, old fellow?" he asked, rising to his feet and calling Yellow Boy to his side by a snap of his fingers.

"Sure!" with a nod. "Ef I hed one, that is, but I reckon they tuck my broncho in out o' the damp!"

"Steady, then," stooping over him. "I'll lend you mine as far as the ranch. You're one of Zimmerman's boys, I reckon?"

"Yes. Jim Branch's my handle. But—never you bother over me," at the same time pushing away the hands that would have lifted him to his feet. "I kin hustle fer myself, I reckon."

"But you can't lay here through the night, man!"

"Then I kin keep a-crawlin' fer som'er's else," with a faint grin. "Thar's work a-plenty ef you feel like doin' of it, boss, an' one part is to find out who the dug-gun critter was as plugged me!"

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Nough like you fer to be a own brother!" was the quick response.

Maverick Mark drew back a pace, half-startled by that unexpected answer. Then, with a short laugh, he said:

"Is that so? Then—how do you know it wasn't me, pardner?"

"Bec'ase you're clean white. He was yaller outside, black inside. Bec'ase you're the man folks call Maverick Mark. An' that's why I ax ye to do the best ye know how to puzzle this mighty mix all out!"

"You mean—just what?"

"Waul, ef this is jest a common raid, meanin' to bring up t'other side o' the river, what made 'em set it goin' the wrong way? An' fer why take a start in broad day? That's what gits me—gits me, bad!"

"It does look rather odd, I must confess," said Maverick Mark with a frown, thumb and finger tagging at his trim imperial. "And why did they set 'em going straight for the barranca?"

"You see 'em? The boys surely turned the

head afore the critters come to that dug-gun ditch?" eagerly yet apprehensively asked Branch.

"I saw them. I helped turn the head, and only a few took a tumble into the barranca. But if the Greasers were over this way, where could they have gone, to escape my sighting them?"

"Thar'd ought to be a trail, ef the fire hain't wiped it clean out. It set me to crawlin' over this way, ye see. But I don't count. Try ef you cain't do somethin' to help the critters, Maverick! That's all I ax o' ye now—thank ye later fer helpin' me out."

His head sunk down upon an arm, but his drooping lids opened at that touch, and he doggedly refused further help when Maverick Mark offered it.

"I'm all right, pardner. I'll jest ketch a weenty nap, then I'll mog 'long ranch-ways. You go—ef no better, find some o' the boys an' tell 'em Rustlers is afoot!"

Eager though he was to press his investigations further, Maverick Mark was loth to leave the poor fellow lying so helpless. He was worse hurt than he seemed to realize, but seeing that aiding him by force would do him still more harm, the Man from Nowhere rode away, after leaving a small flask of whisky and some food with him.

"He'll pull through all right. He's too big-hearted a fellow to peg out easily. And then—Who could that yellow-haired woman be?"

That was the thought uppermost, just then, and Maverick Mark, while searching for the trail of the raiders, hidden as it must be under that ashen carpet, racked his brain in vain for a plausible solution.

If it had been a woman at all answering the brief description he had given Jim Branch, the rest would have seemed easy enough. That would have matched in with the startling information crossing the border which had sent him riding in hot-haste in search of Colonel Creed Cannon. But this—young, lovely, with golden hair and blue eyes!

"If he had been less positive as to her size and age! A woman who has seen as much of life and trickery as the Black Jaguar, could easily enough alter her looks and bleach her hair—or wear a wig, for that matter!" breaking off with a short, hard laugh as he reined in and left the saddle to bend over a bit of ground which offered something worth closer examination.

The trail was found, and as investigation proved, leading in a direction directly the reverse of that plowed so deeply through the turf by the stampeding host.

That fact once settled, Maverick Mark leaped into the saddle and briskly followed the line his keen eyes had laid out. It would be a waste of time to follow on foot, picking up the tracks one by one. If he came to aught which would suggest a change of course on the part of the Rustlers, that would be time enough to slow-track.

With occasional halts to make sure his reasoning had not played him false, Maverick Mark pressed forward, making the most of the waning day, giving a short laugh of grim satisfaction when, striking the prairie beyond where the fire had crawled, he saw the trail plainly impressed upon the ground.

"Riding mighty reckless, looks like!" frowning a bit at that reflection. "Surely they must know a stampede like this would stir up the whole neighborhood? Then—do they invite a racket?"

The nature of the plain lent force to this thought. It was almost entirely devoid of cover sufficient to lend horsemen hiding from unfriendly eyes, much further than Maverick Mark could reach with his unaided eyes, keen and far-sighted though they were.

Yet here these stampedeers had ridden at a leisurely pace, seemingly at ease, though less than a dozen in number, as those hoof-marks declared. And that, too, through a part of Texas where the devil himself was less bitterly hated than aught bearing the brand of Rustler!

"It looks like the Black Jaguar, sure enough!" he muttered, instinctively touching the pistols half-hidden by the silken scarf knotted about his trim waist. "She'd face down the Old Boy himself, once the notion took her! But—who was it Jim Branch saw?"

Ever back to that puzzling point! And the more he thought, the deeper the mystery grew.

Few honest men knew more about the Black Jaguar and her evil band from across the border, but Maverick Mark could not recall any woman connected with the band that at all answered that description.

True, he had not seen aught of the Rustlers for several years, and the information he was bearing to Colonel Creed Cannon came to him at second hand. Still he knew it could be depended upon. The Black Jaguar was afoot, even if this day's work could not be traced to her door.

For several miles further Maverick Mark followed that trail as unerringly as a hound, but then it broke apart, each set of hoofs taking a different course, radiating like the ribs of an opened fan!

"Good enough!" with a chuckle, where most

men would have uttered a curse. "That proves one thing: the rendezvous can't be so mighty much further away."

"Right or wrong, so Maverick Mark reasoned, and without lingering long over the choice, he rode away beside a peculiarly-shaped track, making the best of the fading light.

From the very first he had met with no balk, but before he covered another mile his trailing came to an end through an unforeseen interruption.

He was riding at a gentle lope along the base of a slight swell in the prairie when a sound caused him to draw rein, bending an ear to catch the repetition, if such there should be. It came—the sound of a human voice, lifted in anger!

Slipping a revolver from its scabbard, Maverick Mark turned Yellow Boy directly up the swell, crouching lower in the saddle as they drew near the crest, then abruptly tightening rein as his eyes—barely lifted above the brow of the land-wave—fell upon the figures of both man and woman!

Only a few rods distant they were, plainly visible as he lifted his head higher, guarded against discovery by their quarrel. For quarrel it was, else all signs lied!

His blue eyes flashed vividly as he recognized that trim, graceful figure in the saddle: beyond all doubt the same as noted by Jim Branch before he dropped to the bullet of a Rustler.

The hair that floated loosely from beneath her plumed hat shone yellow as gold in the rays of the setting sun, and her garb, while purely Mexican in its cut and suited for her masculine attitude in the saddle, could not disguise her feminine outlines.

A man on foot was grasping the bridle of her horse near the bit, the other hand lifted as though in rage or expostulation.

"Coward! cur!" came angrily across the space to Maverick Mark's ears, and he smiled grimly as he saw a gloved hand lift a whip threateningly over the head of the fellow on foot. "Free my rein, or—"

"Not until you eat those epithets, girl!" angrily cried the man, also speaking in Spanish. "Not until you promise—"

Maverick Mark was as quick to execute as he was to plan, and even as those angry words came to his ears he was sending Yellow Boy at full speed over the crest and down the gentle slope, pistol in hand and on his lips the stern cry:

"Hands up, you cur, or I'll drill you through!"

At the first leap of the dun horse the Mexican turned swiftly in that direction, his free hand flying to his sash and gripping a pistol with the readiness of one who has mingled freely in wild scenes.

And now, as Maverick Mark came charging down upon them, the fellow swiftly shifted his position, making a shot impossible without great risk of hitting the young woman's horse as well, his own pistol rising to a level.

CHAPTER VII.

A TALK BY THE WAY.

ELOISE THORNTON sat her horse, watching that receding figure with more than a shade of admiration in her gaze. Part of this was due the rider, rather than the man, however.

Southern born and bred, a magnificent equestrian herself, Eloise could hardly conceive of a gentleman apart from a finished horseman. And whatever else he might lack, Maverick Mark was superb in the saddle.

So absorbed was she in watching the man to whom they both owed so much, that she gave a start when Eugene Cannon called out:

"Under the spell, Eloise?"

The half-wild horse was rapidly recovering from that killing race at the head of the stampede, and was protesting stubbornly against the change of riders. It failed to unseat the young ranchero, but its wild antics caused him considerable trouble, by no means soothing his wounded pride.

And when Eloise turned in response to his call, the bright smile that came into her face hardly helped matters much.

"Come down, you brute!" angrily grated Cannon, giving the lasso a sharp jerk with one hand, while the other swung the free loops in swift succession from side to side, each stroke leaving its mark on the damp flanks of his unruly mount.

"Steady!" cried Eloise, warningly, as the broncho reared up, wildly pawing the air and seemingly about to fling itself backward, to crush its angry rider. "Your hand's too heavy, cousin, and—"

"Feel its weight, will you?" cried Eugene, his clinched fist driving the horse back on all-fours, then giving it the steel and causing it to race around in a wide circle until white foam-spots began to show here and there.

"Bold enough—sure-enough seat, but—he wouldn't have tried for mastery so roughly!" murmured the young woman, as Cannon, the victory won at length, came trotting nearer where she waited.

"Ready whenever you are, Eloise," called out her escort, flushed with the rough exercise, but with all signs of ill-humor gone. "Old Zimmerman owes me a dollar or two for breaking his broncho, don't you reckon?"

"No doubt he'll pay the bill when you present it," smiled Eloise, as she set her dapple bay in motion, moving toward the Handcuff Ranch. "You certainly worked hard enough for it. And yet—your nameless friend seemed to get along without much trouble."

"Because this brute hadn't got over its race and jump. No, I won't say that, either," native honesty getting the upper hand. "Maverick Mark is one out of a thousand when it comes to horses, and what any common man can do with a trained pet, I verily believe he can duplicate with a wild horse that never came within a thousand miles of a branding-iron!"

"Isn't that just a trifle hyperbolic, Eugene?"

"It falls short of the mark, rather than overshoots it," stoutly declared Cannon. "I tell you, El, Maverick's a jo-dandy!"

Eloise made no immediate response, but there was a soft glow in her brown eyes, a pleased smile playing about her lips as she turned to look in the direction taken by the Man from Nowhere.

He had faded from sight, but still she could picture him as he rode away on Yellow Boy, her very beau ideal of a prairie cavalier.

"You have known Mr.—our friend, I should say," with a short laugh of comical embarrassment as she added: "What can I call him?"

"What all others call him—Maverick Mark, of course."

"Why do they give him such a fantastic title?"

"I'm not sure that he didn't select it for himself. As for why; well, he gave you a pretty fair idea back yonder. As a cowboy-ess you ought to know what a maverick is."

"I think I do: an estray, a creature without a mark or brand, though far past the age when both are usually applied," quoted Eloise, in mock seriousness, then adding, with a low laugh: "And a lawful prize to the one who first brings the maverick under the yoke!"

"Will you try for the prize, Eloise?" quickly asked Eugene, his black eyes glowing as he leaned toward his fair companion.

"I might go further and fare worse, you think?"

Cannon made no reply. Just then his mount saw fit to cut a few ugly capers, and lest harm come to her steed from those viciously-lashing heels, Eloise fell to one side.

But the recent lesson was not altogether forgotten, and in another minute or so the young couple were once more riding peacefully along, side by side.

"About Maverick, wasn't it?" asked Cannon.

"Yes. I remember. Well, he's a queer customer, in some respects, and I doubt if any man in all Texas, save himself, knows just who and what he really is."

"Didn't he say he was a mystery to himself, even?" quietly put in the young lady.

"That's what he said, but—well, I'll never tell you different. Maverick Mark is good enough for me, particularly after what its owner has done this day. Only for him—you'll try not to think too hard of me, Eloise?"

"Of you?" echoed the young woman, her eyes opening widely.

"Just that, Eloise," soberly. "I run you into a nasty scrape, and hadn't the wit to get you out again. You know I did, so don't try to smooth the raw edges. And if Maverick hadn't come—"

"But he did come," brightly smiled the maiden, with a quick motion drawing a gloved hand over his gloomy visage, as though to smooth away those wrinkles. "He came, and led us out of the wilderness. Now—I want you to tell me all you know about this Man from Nowhere, cousin."

"I thought I had been doing it."

"Only trying to," with a light laugh. "Now—how long have you known this gentleman?"

"Off and on, for half a dozen years, I reckon."

"He has visited at our home, then?"

"He has dropped in, once or twice, but hardly to say visit," hesitated Cannon, then, speaking with more rapidity: "But spare your questions, Eloise, and I'll tell you all I can rake together."

"Thanks, in advance," with a little bow. "Women are proverbially curious, 'tis admitted, and then—"

"Maverick Mark is about as handsome as they turn 'em out, in these degenerate days," with a short laugh.

Miss Thornton leaned across in her saddle to gaze squarely into that face, but her half-frown faded away as she met that half-mischievous eye-sparkle. Even though he might experience a pang of jealousy, Eugene Cannon was too manly to openly display aught of the kind.

"He is handsome, 'Gene," with a defiant little nod. "But I seek fresh information, not an echo of my own judgment."

"I'll tell Maverick that, if it don't slip my memory. Now—what I know about the fellow

would hardly fill a book of any great size, but what I have is at your disposal.

"Taking his own words, together with common report, Maverick Mark is just Maverick Mark. He has no other name. He has no living kin, so far as any one can find out. He has no profession, no property, save his horse and what he carries on his person.

"He has no home, properly speaking, though hardly a roof in all Texas but what would be both glad and proud to give him shelter for as long as he cared to stay."

"Truly, a Man from Nowhere!" murmured the maiden.

"Just that!" with an emphatic nod. "Ten thousand words couldn't begin to describe him one-half so accurately: a Man from Nowhere!"

"But—surely he does not depend on charity?"

"Don't you think it, lady-bird! Mark pays as he goes, and he never seems to lack for money, though I never knew of his earning any save by breaking in a horse now and then. Yet—I've heard vague rumors that he is in Government employ as—well, something in the Secret Service or detective line."

"Do you put faith in such an absurd rumor?"

"Why absurd?"

Eloise had no answer ready. She had a native prejudice against detectives, so-called, and with the memory of that frank, manly countenance still fresh, she could not believe it the face of a bloodhound of the law.

"If you wince at that, wonder what you'd say to a still wilder rumor that tried to spread through Texas a couple of years ago? No less than that Maverick Mark was really a spy in the service of a notorious gang of Mexican Raiders!"

Eugene laughed aloud in scorn, and Eloise joined him. But then a word or two let drop by Maverick Mark just before he left them flashed across her busy brain, and she impulsively cried:

"Who or what is the Black Jaguar, Eugene?"

"What do you know about her?" almost roughly demanded Cannon, his smile vanishing and giving place to a dark, uneasy frown.

"And why must you warn Uncle Creed that she—since the animal is feminine—has broken loose? From a menagerie?"

For the second time since Maverick Mark left them the captured horse showed its lack of training, plunging and kicking, seemingly calling for Cannon's entire attention during the next minute or two. And when the victory was won, Eugene apparently had forgotten her last questions, since he laughingly blurted forth:

"Don't you reckon we've talked Maverick Mark about enough, lady-bird? If you betray such deep interest before the colonel, he'll be mighty apt to charge you with falling in love!"

"And if that charge was true, I'd never be ashamed to admit as much!" quickly retorted the young lady, her eyes glowing brightly. "He is more than a gentleman—he is a man!"

"And I am—a mistake all round!" that look of gloom coming back to his face, as he flashed a glance into hers, then turned away.

A touch of the spur sent her horse close to his side. A little hand caught his arm, almost forcing his face to turn that way. And then, with eye meeting eye, Eloise spoke rapidly:

"Not a mistake, dear cousin, but a man who is entirely too honest to feign what his heart cannot really feel!"

Then, giving her steed free rein, Eloise galloped rapidly away without pausing for an answer.

And what answer could he have made? To deny her assertion might not be telling an actual lie, but neither would it be all truth.

He knew—as Eloise knew—that the dearest wish of Colonel Creed Cannon's heart was that still more holy ties might bind together these twain, all he had left on earth to love. He knew that his father was beginning to chafe over the delay in reaching that understanding. But—he knew that Eloise did not love him as a maiden should love a future husband. While he—he certainly did not love any woman better than Eloise, but—

He left a hiatus right there. He did not know just how to fill it out. And yet, if not jealousy, what was it he felt when Eloise followed Maverick Mark with her eyes so admiringly?

Neither of the young people seemed inclined to renew their chat, but pressed on at a brisk pace, soon after coming in sight of Handcuff Ranch, forming a very pleasing picture in the afternoon glow.

The ground was a trifle more broken here, though still comparatively level, with just inequalities and timber enough to break the monotony of a prairie home. And as they rode more moderately along the edge of the pretty little lake, both gazed admiringly upon the ranch.

It was a relic of former days, and stood apart from the buildings devoted to the cowboys and other employees. The walls were of adobes, half hidden under luxuriant vines and creepers, and though time and altering conditions had wrought many changes in the place, it was a

building still capable of resisting an armed assault.

"There's father—" began Eugene, catching sight of a tall, military-looking figure in front of the ranch, but Eloise shot swiftly ahead of her cousin, half maliciously resolved to forestall his message.

"Back again, Uncle Creed!" she cried, drawing rein before him. "And with a pressing message from Maverick Mark. The Black Jaguar has broken loose, he says!"

With a hoarse cry, Colonel Cannon staggered back, pale as death.

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL CANNON AND HIS WARD.

NOTHING had been further from her thoughts than such a result, and as the colonel clutched at his throat like one suffocating, Eloise sprang from the saddle with a cry of dismay.

"Oh, uncle—don't! I didn't mean— Eugene, quick!"

As her hands touched him, and as he saw her frightened face, Colonel Cannon rallied, forcing a laugh as he panted:

"It's nothing—don't scare—I'm all right, now!"

Letting his horse go free, Eugene sprang to his father's side, lending him the support he really seemed to need, despite his insistence that it was nothing worse than a brief dizziness.

Pale, frightened, for once at a loss how to act, or what to do, Eloise never resented the half-angry glance which Eugene flashed that way.

"I tell you I'm all right!" testily cried the old soldier, shaking off those solicitous hands. "But what—who says the Black Jaguar is on the loose again?"

"We met Maverick, and he bade me warn you, sir," gently muttered his son. "Eloise shouldn't have blurted it out the way she did."

"Nor would I, if you hadn't kept me in ignorance!" flashed the maiden. "How was I to know that—"

With a quick movement Colonel Cannon covered her red lips with his snow-white mustaches, then laughed evenly as he pushed her gently back, saying:

"I can't afford to let my only two pets quarrel, so go change your dress, lady-bird. And then—well, I'll try to satisfy your curiosity concerning this matter, pet. Go—I ask it, Eloise."

He was obeyed, though with evident reluctance, and, when she was out of ear-shot, Colonel Cannon asked his son for a full explanation.

"That's all I know, and all we really had time for," hurriedly spoke Eugene. "Maverick just said to warn you she was afoot, bent on mischief. Then—I'm afraid she's got here ahead of Mark, too!"

"What do you mean by that, son?"

"You haven't heard of the big stampede?"

"Not a word. Out with it. Boil it down."

In marvelously few words Eugene told his story, leaving the details for Eloise to fill out, as he said.

And when the colonel fairly comprehended what had taken place, he started toward the distant stables in hot haste to take saddle, dropping his cane and seeming to forget how sorely crippled he was, just then.

But Eugene barred the way, speaking rapidly:

"You can't go, father! You can hardly hobble with a cane, and—"

"My horse don't need a cane, though."

"But there's no need of your taking horse, father. I can do it all, just as well if not better than you could. Then, too, it might be worse. It was Zimmerman's stock that stampeded, for his brand was on the nag Maverick caught up for me. So—I'll start the boys off, then come back for your orders, father."

Just then Colonel Cannon struck his gouty toe against a hard clod of dirt, the exquisite pain drawing a muffled snarl of agony through his tightly-clinched teeth. But that little accident convinced him of his present helplessness, and with a groan of regret he said:

"Go, then! Take the cowboys, and do all you can to help. Set them on the track, then come back to report. Go—an hour now is worth a week later!"

Thankful to gain his way so easily, Eugene ran off, the colonel turning and hobbling back toward the hacienda.

He had no eyes for its beauties, just then, though he had learned to love the old building dearly, since the smoke of battle blew over and left him face to face with the necessity of making a new home.

He wheeled when the front of the building was reached, leaning on his cane and favoring his gouty limb as he watched the men skurrying hither and yon, hastening their preparations for a campaign which none knew better than they might last for days without a break.

But though his still keen eyes watched each movement about the stables—which, like all other buildings rendered necessary in carrying on a stock ranch of such vast dimensions, were at a considerable distance from the hacienda itself—Colonel Cannon hardly gave his men a thought. He was thinking of the words flung

at him so gayly by the red lips of his beautiful ward, the *Black Jaguar* is afoot!

His face showed deep lines, not a traced by the finger of old age. And in his deep-set eyes lurked a look such as a haunted man might be expected to carry.

Tall beyond the ordinary, his figure was still erect as only an old soldier can defy the weight of growing years. His muscular frame was sparingly covered with flesh, but there were no awkward angles visible. Now, as he had ever been, Creed Cannon was noted for his masculine beauty.

His hair, worn short, was white as snow, and so were his heavy mustaches, but the thick brows above his black eyes showed not a solitary thread of silver. And this, with the narrow scar as of a saber-cut that crossed his right temple, added to his military appearance.

An old soldier he was, too. Even before the Civil War broke forth, Creed Cannon had seen hot service, though after an irregular sort of fashion. He had been one of the still famous Texan Rangers, and never another of all that gallant host had done his adopted State better or truer service, when it was made a debatable ground, over which raiders, both red and yellow, swept like a besom of ruin.

Then, when the war actually broke out, Creed Cannon went with his native State, and was one of the first to offer his sword to South Carolina, taking with him a company of rough-riders such as Texas alone could supply at that day.

He fought throughout the war, as best he knew how, caring little for promotion, as an empty honor, and bluntly refusing further advancement when he attained command of a regiment of cavalry.

"I've got to lead the way, not point it out!" was his grim excuse for that refusal.

And while the war lasted, his men never lacked one to lead the way, though their ranks might have been fuller if their colonel had been less daring. But with him to lead, they were eager to follow even up to the cannon's very mouth.

Then, when peace was declared, Colonel Cannon accepted the result as all honest Southerners did. He gave up his sword, and went back—not to his home, for he had none!

"Uncle Creed?" came a low, sweet voice, startling him from watching the swift departure of his son with a number of cowboys. "If I promise to be very, very good in the future, can I hope for forgiveness?"

As though a magic sponge had been swept across his face, those gloomy lines vanished, and it was a smiling countenance that turned toward Eloise Thornton, and an almost merry voice that answered:

"Will you give me a kiss, lady-bird?"

"A thousand, if you can stand them, dear Guardy!" cooed Eloise, her soft arms encircling his neck, her red lips pressing his.

"One at a time, and they'll last longer," laughed the veteran, his palms pressing her softly flushed cheeks as he held her head back, gazing lovingly into her face as though she was his own child, instead of no actual kindred. "Then—wouldn't I be robbing the lad, deary?"

"Eugene? Where is he? Has he—"

"Gone to perform my duty, as well as his own," with a nod toward those now barely visible horsemen. "Ah, never grow old, lady-bird! Better die while youth lingers, for—Ugh! confound that toe!"

Instantly her arm, so strong though so shapely, was about his bending form, and, leaning on the maiden, Colonel Cannon hobbled back to his own room. On the ground floor, of course, since the hacienda was truly Spanish in its construction, with all the chambers on one floor, and its roof an *azotea* which might almost be called a flower-garden.

When the colonel sunk into his particular seat—a huge cushioned chair, formed of curiously locked elk-antlers—Eloise curled up at his side, one fair arm resting gently upon his still sound leg, her brown eyes fixed affectionately upon his pain-lined face, waiting in silence until that unruly toe should subside its grumblings for the time.

Although no kindred blood flowed in their veins, both loved each other none the less deeply for that.

Mayo Thornton had been the one bosom friend and confidant Creed Cannon had while the Civil War raged. They were like brothers in heart, even as they were brothers in arms, and when, drawing the final breaths of life, just before the end, Mayo Thornton begged Creed Cannon to see that his motherless girl did not suffer where he could aid, he vowed to care for her as he might for an own daughter.

Right well he had kept that pledge. If Eloise, at times, mourned for the parents she had lost, she never really felt the lack of a father.

Only for one thing, she might almost have forgotten that she was not his daughter. But when she knew that the colonel hoped for a union between herself and his only son, that memory was forced upon her.

"Gone at last, thank Heaven!" drawing a long breath as those exquisite pains suddenly

died away. "And now, lady-bird, what didoes have you two young reprobates been cutting up this afternoon?"

"Two, you say, uncle? Eugene is one, of course, but the other—do you mean Maverick Mark?" innocently asked the maiden, her eyes widely opened as they turned up to his grim face.

"What had Maverick Mark to do with it?"

"Then Eugene didn't tell you of our adventure, uncle?"

"Just skimmed over the surface. What was it? He didn't let you run blindly into danger—real danger, I mean?"

"Oh, no; he just showed me the way, by taking the lead himself."

Colonel Cannon laughed. He could not help it, looking down upon that innocently mischievous face at his knee. But his face grew grave and even gray as he listened to her story, glossed over as that was when she saw his strong uneasiness.

But when she came to speak of Maverick Mark, she could not bear to do him injustice merely to spare Eugene, and all the rest of their adventure was given with glowing enthusiasm.

Gradually a frown came into that sternly handsome face, but Eloise failed to note the danger signal until she reached the end, where the strong arm and quick hand of Maverick Mark had dragged Eugene out of the very jaws of death.

"Was it not gloriously done, uncle?" she cried, then stopped short off as she noted that stern frown on his face.

"Just what any white man would have done under similar circumstances, child," he said, his tones harsher than he intended.

"Why do you dislike him, Uncle Creed? What wrong has Maverick Mark done you or yours that you frown like that at mention of his name?"

"It's not that I dislike Maverick Mark, but that I love my son far better, Eloise," was his slow response.

"He saved that son's life this day!"

"And won—" impulsively began the veteran, only to check himself quickly, adding instead of the rash words that had come to his lips: "I'm not blaming you for making a sort of hero out of the young man, lady-bird. You are right in feeling grateful to him for the service he was fortunate enough to render us all. I am very grateful, myself, but gratitude is one thing, and reason is another. Don't. Let me say my say out, child."

"Maverick Mark is an enigma to everybody but himself. No one can say who or what he is. He has no name, no occupation, no kindred, taking him at his own words. I firmly believe he is honorable, as times go now."

"If not honorable, then there is no truth in faces!"

"I admit that, too, yet he may be one of the worst of criminals, for all that. It may be true, what some men have hinted, that he is two men in one, playing honest the better to profit as a sinner!"

"Why do you tell me all this, Uncle Creed?" slowly asked Eloise.

"Because I see that he has made a powerful impression on your fancy, and because I want you to— But I forgot," once again forcing back what might prove risky speech. "You asked me who was the *Black Jaguar*, I believe? Well, to boil it down, she's a woman in seeming, a fiend in reality."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLACK JAGUAR.

THE ghost of a smile flitted across that fair face as it gently rested against the colonel's knee, but Eloise was content to accept.

Although so awkwardly done, a change of subject was fully as welcome to her as to the colonel, just then.

Not that she had aught to conceal from her guardian, save for his own good. He ought to be in better health when told that his dearest dream must fade away without realization.

"Why such a beastly title, guardy?" she asked, smoothing over that clumsy change of front.

"Because it fits the one who bears it. Cunning, sly, treacherous, skulking until its victim is fairly within reach, then fierce and blood-crazy until its hungry thirst is fully appeased! That's the four-footed jaguar, Eloise, and that's its likeness in human shape, Carlita Quesado!"

"She is a Mexican, then?"

"More in name and nature than in reality, I reckon," with a short, disagreeable laugh. "T'would be no easy matter to say just what she is. Some declare she is purely Spanish. Others say she is a half-breed—part Mexican, part Apache. Still others are ready to make oath there is black Gypsy blood flowing through her veins."

"And you, Uncle Creed?"

"Know she's all devil, save in shape and face!" was the bitter response. "Up to this day I had hoped she was food for worms, but now—God grant we may come face to face while my right

arm is strong enough to strike her down—down to the death she has earned ten thousand times over!"

Involuntarily Eloise Thornton shrunk away from the veteran, fairly awed by the fierce intensity of those words, by the savage glitter filling those eyes, usually black as jet, but now glowing redly like twin coals of living fire. Never before had she seen him so entirely given over to such vengeful passions, and it frightened her sorely.

Colonel Cannon must have seen something of this, for a hand went out to caressingly touch that fair crown, gently drawing it back to its former position at his knee. And when he spoke again his voice was kindly as of old:

"It's a bitter black subject, lady-bird, but if you care to hear—"

"Not unless you really wish to tell me, dear guardy," was her quick interposition. "I never knew—I'm sorry that I blundered so wretchedly as to mention that wicked creature at all!"

"How devilishly wicked you shall judge for yourself, Eloise," nodded her guardian, taking a morbid pleasure in touching on the black past, now the ice was fairly broken. "You ought to know before Eugene—while I'm able to tell you, that is," forcing a cough to help cover the slip which only proved how constantly he was thinking over what could never come to pass.

So the maiden told herself while sitting at his knee, then felt the warm blood suffusing her cheeks as two figures rose in contrast before her mind's eye: one the heir to all that vast property, the other—a man without home, name, kindred, literally a Man from Nowhere!

"She wronged you—this terrible *Black Jaguar*, guardy?"

"It was long ago that the first thing happened, deary," abruptly began the veteran, without more directly answering her hasty question.

"Before you were born, in fact. When I was one of the Rangers, then the only safeguard honest settlers near the border had against both red and yellow devils."

"One of the worst of these—a Mexican, who called himself Seraphin Quesado—gave us more trouble than all the rest. Time and time again he would bring his gang over the river, striking swift and sure, leaving more than blood of cattle behind to call out for vengeance, then fleeing back to find safety on the further side of the Grande."

"Not one of us but what had bitter cause to hate the devil, and each one of us had sworn to hunt him down if it took a lifetime. And at length we succeeded."

"It was my rope that tore the rascal out of his saddle, and my hands that bound him like a pig for market. I felt proud of it then, for Seraphin Quesado had loudly boasted that a thousand men couldn't take him alive. I wanted all men to know that his boasts were lies, that one man had done the work. Now—would to God I had emptied his saddle with a bullet, instead!"

His proud head drooped, one unsteady hand rose to meet his closing eyes. Eloise reached up to touch her warm lips to his forehead. But before she could find words to express her sympathy, the veteran rallied, tossing back his head and aquaring his shoulders, speaking with greater rapidity:

"I'd act just the same if I had my life to live over! If Seraphin Quesado had been shot dead, half those who feared his raids would never have been fully satisfied that he was dead, that a mistake had not been made in the man. So—I acted for what I thought the very best."

"The news was spread all through Texas, and those who had ever suffered loss at the hands of Seraphin Quesado, were invited to attend his trial, and his execution as well!"

"They came in scores, men, women, even children, each and every one of whom was able as anxious to bear witness against the blood-stained demon whose career was nearing its end."

"That was the beginning, child. I was pointed out as the man who captured Seraphin Quesado. I was elected judge when he was brought to trial. There was little law here, then, you know, deary; only justice!"

"I could do no less than sentence Seraphin Quesado to death, after hearing the evidence. I did so sentence him, and I did it gladly, too!"

"There was little delay, you can rest assured. From sentence to execution was but a few steps. Seraphin Quesado died cursing us all, but—die he did!"

"He richly deserved his fate!" exclaimed Eloise, as the colonel's head drooped a bit. "You acted superbly, Uncle Creed!"

"There was one woman who failed to see it in that light," with a short, bitter laugh, once again rallying his powers. "I saw her then, for the first time. She came to me—to me!—and with tears streaming down her cheeks, begged permission to bear away the body out of which life had hardly fled. She said he had been her husband. Her name was Carlita Quesado."

"The *Black Jaguar*?"

"Not then," shaking his head, with a forced smile. "She looked more like an angel than a tiger. I never saw a more beautiful face and form than hers. And so— Well, she was a woman, and we were but men. She took the

corpse away with her, and we all thought it was a job mighty well ended. Instead—

"Within the month, a still worse scourge came upon that part of the State, and its name was Quesado! And then, as time passed, and men grew to know that devilishly persistent raider better, they came to accept the name she adopted for herself, and all the talk was of the Black Jaguar.

"Sue struck at other men's pockets, but her blows were leveled at my heart! They came home—too many of them! And—

"When those blows began to fall, Eloise, I had a happy home, a loving and beloved wife, children to—

"When the last one fell, I had nothing, none save little Eugene! And even him I feared to keep near me! Think of it, girl!" his voice hoarse and choked with intense emotions, none the less bitter because so many long years had passed by since those heart-crushing blows fell upon him and his. "Think how—No, no!" suddenly changing both tone and manner. "Don't think of it! Try to forget—try to help me forget by burying such of the bitter black past as I've given you a faint glimpse of—and forgive a foolish old man for troubling your happy heart, lady-bird!"

"If I knew how to comfort you, dearest!" she murmured, arms about his neck, lips softly touching his forehead.

"You do that every hour of your life, pet," forcing a smile as his eyes met hers. "And some day, not far in the future, I trust, you're going to make me really happy once more by—Can't you guess, Eloise? There—I know you understand, but don't try to tell me—I can wait yet a little longer for good tidings. So—take your glasses, deary, and go to the roof. Look if you can see anything of the boy. He may be coming back to report. Go—I'd rather be alone for a bit."

"Not to think—not to brood over the—over what can't be mended, dear uncle?" coaxingly murmured Eloise, but rising to her feet and moving away without waiting for an answer.

She felt an intense sympathy for him, just then, and would have given much to be able to comfort him. Yet—not just that! The words he most wished to hear would surely choke her in the utterance.

"Eugene wouldn't like it—though he tries to hide the truth, it would be almost as disagreeable to him as to me!" flashed through her busy brain, as, field-glass in hand, Eloise ascended the stairs and gained the *azotea*, passing through the masses of flowering plants, pausing to lean upon the parapeted wall as her eyes gazed unseeingly toward the crimsoning horizon, where the sun was beginning to dip behind the undulating plain.

For several minutes she stood thus, seeing naught, buried in far from pleasant thought. Partly of the story outlined by her guardian, too briefly to clear away the mystery which she had often surmised must hang over his past life. Partly of that hope which she began to feel assured could never come to full fruition.

She did not love Eugene, nor did he love her as a man loves the woman he takes to his bosom as a wife. And then—

A warm flush stole into her face, and more to cheat herself than with the expectation of making any discovery of moment, Eloise turned her glasses toward the west and southwest, that being the more likely quarter from which to expect Eugene Cannon.

The slowly-moving glasses came to a pause, and she caught her breath quickly. Two figures were brought within her field of vision. Both riding, both—sinking from sight behind a swell of ground!

Were they coming or going? Was one of them Eugene, on his return? If so, was his companion a cowboy, or—

A name was shaping itself in her brain, but Eloise tried to blot it out. She turned a little aside, gazing across at the picturesque little lake, always lovely, but seemingly more so than usual this calm, perfect evening.

And the road ran close along its nearest shore! And if it was Eugene and—a cowboy, they would come by that road! They would be riding fast—Eugene always rode at a gallop. 'Twould not take much longer to fetch him near enough to be sure. Even now—

Once more the glass was leveled, once more those brown eyes were searching for—not exactly what they found, however!

Although still so far away, those two riders were brought near enough her eyes by those powerful lenses for Eloise to see that they were strangers. And neither of the twain could be that particular stranger to whose bold daring and steady nerve two lives were owing.

So much she distinguished before another dip in the prairie concealed the riders from her eyes.

They were plainly approaching Hand-cuff Ranch, to give the hacienda its popular yet detested title. And unless their course should be altered very shortly, Eloise might be sure they were bound for her home.

The peculiar lay of the ground prevented another view until the riders were within easy eyeshot of the hacienda, and as they drew near

the curving shore of the little lake, Eloise gave a quick start, hastily fitting the glass to her eyes once more.

She paid no attention to the second rider, beyond noting the fact that it was a tall, athletic man, mounted on a large mule, but she eagerly scanned the other, her breath quickening as her wild suspicion seemed founded on fact.

Despite the masculine attitude, and half-masculine garb, she knew this erect, richly-garbed rider was a woman! What if—

"Can it be—what if it's the Black Jaguar?" panted the maiden, lowering the field-glass with a sudden thrill of apprehension.

CHAPTER X.

A CALLER ON BUSINESS.

EVEN as those wild words passed her lips, Eloise Thornton realized their absurdity, and a short laugh helped bring the color back to her cheeks.

"The idea!" she murmured, in self-scorn, but still watching those deliberately approaching figures like one held by a spell. "The Black Jaguar may have broken loose—he said it! But she'd never dare come here—after this fashion!"

By this time the two riders had gained the shore of the little lake, their relative positions unchanged. The woman rode in advance, her horse stepping as though proud of its burden, its neck arched, its heavy tail almost touching the ground as it swayed gracefully with each pace.

His rider sat erect, her figure only partially revealed by the garb she wore, a bronze-hued *manga* falling in graceful folds to her haunches of her steed, an end of yellow crape descending from her turban-like head-covering.

A few paces to the rear rode her companion; plainly a servant, from his position as well as his mount—a large Spanish mule. And he, too, wore the Mexican costume, gaudy yet becoming.

Once again that wild, impossible fancy assailed Eloise, and as she saw the woman turning more directly toward the front of the house, she turned and sped swiftly down-stairs, startling Colonel Cannon by her impulsive entrance, rather than by the words that flowed from her lips:

"She's here—the Black Jaguar, uncle!"

"Where—how many?" cried Cannon, springing to his feet, one hand mechanically dropping to the hip against which his war-worn saber had hung in past days.

"Only two, but—"

Colonel Cannon dropped back into his easy-chair, laughing heartily. And, though hardly knowing why, Eloise joined him.

"Only two?" as soon as he could command his voice. "Then be sure your Black Jaguar isn't the Black Jaguar I used to know, lady-bird! When she comes, 'twill be with many a stout cub at her heels! It's a good jest, of course, but—what do you mean, child?"

"I don't—I hardly know," confessed the maiden, her wild fears scattered by that laugh and the words which had followed after. "There is a woman coming, and she rides like they say Mexican women ride. And so I—I just ran down to let you know."

"To startle me out of a year's growth?" laughed the colonel, yet half frowning as he gingerly tested his gouty foot with the weight of his body, laughing again as he found no remonstrating pains. "You built better than you knew, lady-bird! I do believe you've scared my gout into the next county!"

"Then I'll not apologize for frightening you, Guardy," urged the maiden, drawing back her proffered arm. "But—you are not going out to meet them, uncle?"

"Who else, child? Cook's gone to see her mother; I said she might. The old lady is ill, and you said a lady was coming."

"I said woman, not lady," with a slight curl of her red lips as she recalled that vision. "It ought to be man, from her manner of riding!"

If he heard, Colonel Cannon did not heed, being already at the door of his room, making for the front entrance, moving with greater ease than for weeks past, though he still carried his cane. And this blissful freedom from physical pain doubtless helped bring that genial smile to his face as he bowed to that tall, erect figure just coming to a halt before the building.

"I wish to see Colonel Cannon," said the woman, answering his bow with a graceful inclination of her turbaned head.

"That is my name, madam. Allow me to assist you?"

"Thanks," with another bow, but springing lightly to the ground before he could reach her side. "Take, Pablo!" tossing the reins to the man on the mule.

"The stables are yonder," nodded the colonel, to the servant. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to help yourself. My boys were called away by—on business, you see!"

"You are very kind, dear sir," pleasantly observed the stranger, but waving her servant away. "We'll not trouble you so far. Walk them about slowly, Pablo, and don't give them drink for a few minutes."

"But, ma'am, you're surely not going to leave us so soon? It's nearly night now, and—"

"Where business calls, its servants must obey," laughed the stranger, easily, turning toward the ranch-owner. "And 'tis business matters that force me to ask your indulgence for a few minutes. I am not too presuming, señor?"

"If I can serve you in any way, madam, be sure the will is not lacking," politely bowed the veteran, at the same time keenly yet respectfully scrutinizing that cold, almost haughty countenance.

Although he knew such an idea was ridiculous on its very face, he could not quite banish the chilling fear which Eloise had planted in his heart and brain with her wild speech, but a few minutes earlier.

This woman was dressed after the Mexican fashion when a journey in the saddle is undertaken. Her complexion was almost swarthy, her eyes black as jet and full of fire. In all save her accent she seemed a Mexican. But he looked in vain for aught that could recall the widow of Seraphin Quesado, as he had seen her for the first and the last time—under the gallows where still hung the lawless raider.

The woman stepped forward, and the colonel, lowering his eager eyes, led the way direct to his room, placing a chair for his caller. Her gloved hand rested on its back as she turned her gaze upon Eloise, who had kept them company.

"Your daughter, señor?" she asked, in low, yet deep and mellow tones.

"A daughter in love, if not in fact, madam," bowed the veteran, adding: "Miss Thornton, this is—"

"A mere caller on business, señor," with a stiff bow, her voice growing cold and almost harsh. "After that business is finished, if you still deem an introduction suitable, I will cheerfully play my part."

"I'll endeavor to bear up under the misfortune, madam," bowed the maiden, her cheeks flushed with something akin to aversion.

"As my business is private, señor, may I ask when you will be at liberty to hear me?"

"No time like the present, then. Eloise, oblige me by looking if you can see anything of the boy. Please."

"I'll be within hearing, uncle, and will come at your slightest call," Eloise pointedly observed, bowing to him, not to the stranger, then leaving the room.

"On private business, I think you said, madam?"

"Pray be seated," her voice softening a bit as she accepted the chair he had placed for her use, one gloved hand hidden under her *manga*, while the other softly drummed on the little stand between them. "Yes, I have come to see you on private business. So private, in fact, that I risked offending your daughter rather than broach the subject in her presence."

"I have no secrets from my ward, but you may feel differently, of course. Now—pray tell me how I can serve you."

There came no immediate response. Those black eyes—"eyes of a snake!" as Eloise had mentally called them—drooped, their owner apparently considering how best to open up.

Colonel Cannon did not attempt to hurry his caller. He was glad of another chance to closely inspect that face, doing so less politely because he felt a little irritated by the manner in which his favorite had been treated by this stranger.

Surely a stranger, he decided, once again. True, he had only seen Carlita Quesado once—when she came to beg for the body of the criminal she declared was her husband. But still he felt positive he would recognize her again, though fifty years should pass before that meeting took place.

Carlita Quesado had been tall; so was this woman. She had been dark of skin, with jetty hair and eyes. Both of these were possessed by this woman. And their ages, too, could not be greatly dissimilar, making due allowance for the years that had crept by since that day of expiation.

Yet—this surely could not be that weeping girl; the Carlita Quesado who was destined to become an even greater scourge than her evil husband had been!

His scrutiny came to an end as his caller made an abrupt movement, though still without lifting her eyes to his face. One hand brought forth a small book from beneath her *manga*, and turning a leaf or two, she appeared to be refreshing her memory on some important point. Then she spoke, flashing a keen look into his grave countenance:

"I am not mistaken in thinking you are Colonel Cannon—Colonel Creed Cannon?"

"You are not mistaken, madam. That is my name and title."

"The title won in the Confederate Army, was it not?"

The old soldier bowed in silence. Something in her manner, in that persistent gaze, began to irritate him, and he feared to speak lest his tongue betray his feelings too plainly for politeness. After all, she was a woman, and his guest.

"You had seen service before you entered the Southern Army, I am informed. You belonged to the force known as the Texan Rangers?"

"And proud to claim that privilege, madam!"

"Just so," showing some marvelously white and even teeth in a smile as she bowed across the little table, slipping the book into its former hiding-place, her hand remaining hidden in the folds of her *manga*. "I comprehend your meaning. You were serving for glory, not for gold, in those days. But I digress. I came hither to talk, not of glory or of arms, but of business."

"My time is yours, madam, as long as you see fit to claim it."

"Thanks, señor. I'll not detain you many minutes longer, unless— But to business! You own this place, I believe?"

"You are rightly informed. I do own this place."

"Which is worth—how many of your dollars, señor?"

Colonel Cannon flushed hotly, his lips compressing tightly for a moment. But then, smothering his anger, he spoke stiffly:

"Really, ma'am, you must excuse me. I never took the trouble to count up, for I never felt the slightest temptation to sell my ranch."

"Still, you would sell if any person offered you your own price?" persisted the stranger, smiling curiously while keeping those eyes— they really were of a serpent-like nature!—steadily fixed upon the veteran's face.

"I have no price, I beg you to believe, madam. I have passed the age when a man wishes to accumulate gold. I have all I desire. I shall never leave this place until I leave it for the grave!"

"But in case one should offer you what even you must admit is worth far more than the place?"

"I can't conceive of such a price. I shall never sell out."

Cold, almost harsh his voice sounded, but still that smile deepened, still those glittering orbs seemed trying to fascinate him, still that deep, almost musical voice returned to the charge.

"You would not be the first man who has found good cause to alter even his firmest convictions, Señor Cannon. I really believe you will think better of this. I actually offer a wager that you will not only sell out, but that you will beg me to name my own price for the property. And so—"

"You are a lady. I can only repeat my words: this place is not for sale. I have no price to set upon the property. If this is all your business, and you decline to lodge under my roof, shall I call your man?"

"Wait," that hidden hand issuing from the folds of the *manga* and flipping a bit of paper across the table. "Oblige my by reading that!"

Colonel Cannon unfolded the narrow slip, his stern eyes quickly mastering the brief message written thereon. It read:

"The coffin lied. Your children still live!"

"Merciful God!" he gasped, hoarsely. "And you are—"

"Carlita Quesado, the Black Jaguar!"

CHAPTER XI.

MAVERICK MARK TAKES A PRIZE.

YELLOW BOY came charging down the gentle slope, and Maverick Mark already had the Mexican covered with his six-shooter, when that worthy so dextrously shifted his position, making a shot entirely too risky for any but the most reckless of men to attempt.

A vicious oath answered back the challenge of the Man from Nowhere, and another revolver covered its living target.

Even then Maverick could have dropped the rascal before he could take even a snap-shot, only for his chivalrous thought for that living shield. Not that he feared missing his mark, for he knew his own skill with gun or pistol. But he knew that only a large bone could stop his lead from passing clear through the fellow, and if a bone was struck, it might deflect the lead sufficiently upward to injure the woman.

A man's brain works with marvelous rapidity in such moments, and all this occurred to Maverick Mark in less than a single breath. And so, caring less for himself than for others, he gave Yellow Boy the spur and dashed on, risking a single shot from the Mexican, knowing that he would be upon him before a second could be fired.

But it was not to be. That uplifted whip fell swiftly, its pliant lash curling around the leveled weapon, jerking it upward and aside, just as the hammer fell, sending the bullet harmlessly toward the sky.

"Good enough!" cried the Man from Nowhere, leaving the saddle without taking the trouble to check Yellow Boy.

As though his joints were cushioned with rubber, he rebounded, his sinewy fingers gripping the furious Mexican even before his toes touched earth again.

The fellow had been taken completely by surprise by that deft disarming, and though curses

were flowing freely enough from his tongue, he seemed to have less perfect control of his other members, and with hardly the semblance of a struggle, Maverick Mark twisted him from his footing, turning him over in the air, bringing him heavily to earth.

"Don't kill him, señor!" came to his ears in clear, startled tones, as the prairie free lance fell on top of the Mexican, to make sure of his prize.

A hollow groan burst from the overthrown rascal as that double shock came, and pausing barely long enough to take one glance into his purpling face, Maverick Mark turned his eyes toward the young woman, whose startled horse was still backing away.

"Your will is my law, señorita," he said, following her example and using the Spanish tongue. "Only for your brave act, I would be lying where he is, but with a bullet through my heart!"

Time enough to utter those swift sentences Maverick Mark stole, but he was not Quixotic enough to run any long chances. He saw that the Mexican was rallying from that heavy shock, and with practiced hands he disarmed the fellow before drawing back and rising erect.

"If you think the *ladrone* has been punished sufficiently, señorita, far be it from me to contradict you; but—"

"'Twas all a mistake—a misunderstanding, señor," came a slightly unsteady response, her eyes shifting before his admiring gaze.

"A mistake that would have cost me my life, only for your ready nerve, señorita," bowed Maverick Mark. "I dared not shoot, lest I kill dove as well as vulture, so—"

The change that came into her face proved sufficient warning for one trained in wild life so thoroughly, and wheeling swiftly, Maverick Mark faced the Mexican he had so recently overthrown.

He was scrambling to his feet, his face full of deadly rage, his hands seeking pistol or knife with which to wipe out his defeat.

"Steady, señor!" coldly cried the Texan, hands at his waist yet making no attempt to draw a weapon. "Don't make me— All right, my covey!" changing both tongue and manner as the Mexican leaped at his throat with curving fingers.

A lightning-like parry turned those arms aside, then, caught about his middle, the Mexican was tossed into the air as a strong lad might handle a bundle of straw, to fall with a heavy jar, head and shoulders striking the earth first.

"An ounce of practice is worth a pound of preaching, pardner," the athlete laughingly observed, hands once more at his hips as he stood watching his fallen antagonist. "I don't reckon you'll be quite as handsome when you get up, but I'm open to lay long odds you'll know a mighty sight more!"

"He is wild, mad, like one crazy, sir," said the young woman, riding nearer the Texan, smiling faintly as he turned a surprised look that way, with:

"You are American, then? I thought—"

"I can speak English a little—no more, señor," with a shake of the head. "I am Spanish—what you call Mexicana."

"Beg pardon, señorita. I don't wish to pry into your secrets at all, but—is this fellow your enemy?"

A troubled look came into that fair face, and though those red lips parted, they apparently found the right answer hard to shape. So, at least, Maverick Mark fancied, and he quietly added:

"I've always found it wisest to crush the head of a serpent when once beneath my heel, señorita."

He turned once more toward the Mexican, who was rallying from that second fall, growling, gasping, hardly able to regain his feet unaided, yet full of venom as the reptile to which the Texan had just likened him. And as his dust-veiled eyes fell upon that athletic figure standing at ease, a torrent of Spanish oaths burst from his mouth.

"Steady, pardner!" coldly cried Mark, his blue eyes winning a dangerous glitter as he saw those trembling hands once again fumbling for the missing weapons. "I've upset your apple-cart twice. The next time I'll spill all your peaches, maybe. And—you're on the wrong side of the river for that sort of cussing, too!"

Those curses stopped at his first words, the Mexican brushing a hand repeatedly across his eyes, striving to clear his vision, the better to hold his own in the death-grapple which surely must follow his humiliation; but, as Maverick Mark paused, they began again.

"Melchoir—silence!" sharply cried the young woman, at the same time sending her horse past the Texan, bending low in her saddle as she briefly paused near the infuriated desperado.

Maverick Mark failed to catch the few words dropped so swiftly from her lips, but he knew they were Spanish, and he believed they were only such as an acquaintance, if not an actual friend, would have used under the circumstances. Still, he gave no sign, even smiling as the young woman swayed aside to avoid that clinched fist.

"Steady, pardner!" he said, striding forward until just within arm's-length of the Mexican.

"And who the foul fiend may you be?" demanded the fellow, still using the Spanish tongue, seemingly paying more attention to that half-Mexican garb than to the wholly American dialect.

"Call me schoolmaster, if you like, and here's lesson first: that's dangerous lingo to use on this side the big river, pardner, after what's happened here this day!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Melchoir, in unaccented English.

"The merest trifle in the world, pardner," with a short, careless laugh and outflinging of one hand. "There's been a raid by a gang of Greasers, a big stampede of stock, at least one man murdered by—"

"Do you mean to accuse me of all this?" fiercely interrupted the Mexican, his face flushing darkly, the big veins starting out on his temples, his hands clinching tightly for lack of more deadly weapons.

"Well, I'm not saying you did it all on your own hook, stranger, but I do say this much: only for finding you in the presence of a lady, I'd run the risk and stretch your neck on general principles!"

The Mexican recoiled a bit at those coldly fierce words, and the young woman gave a sharp cry, like one who feared his threat was about to be put into execution.

Maverick Mark turned with a bland smile, though his tones were almost as gravely earnest as his words:

"You are in great peril, señorita, though, of course, 'tis through no fault of your own. But much mischief has been wrought by rascals who wear your national garb, and should my countrymen catch you near this spot, I fear even your sex might not—"

"Guard thee, señor!" almost shrieked the young woman, but once more Maverick Mark proved himself amply able to take care of himself.

With all his seeming recklessness, he never took a step without counting the cost, and while his eyes were averted, his ears were doing full duty. So—Melchoir met a ready antagonist, in place of one with his back turned.

There was a brief struggle, then the Mexican went down for the third time, those sinewy fingers giving his throat a parting squeeze before their owner cast a glance toward the young woman, speaking in cold, sharp tones:

"Toss me your *riata*, señorita, unless you wish to see me—so!"

One hand flashed forth a gleaming blade, its point quivering above that helpless throat.

"Mercy—spare his life, señor!" cried the woman, swiftly freeing her lasso and tossing it toward the thrice-victor.

Maverick Mark rolled the nearly senseless villain over on his face, drawing his arms back and slipping the noose around them above the elbows. He took a couple of half-hitches around the fellow's body, then sprung to his feet, holding the extra length in one hand while lightly touching the pale-faced woman on an arm with the other.

"I spoke no more than the truth, señorita, just now. There is no safety on this side of the Rio Grande for one who wears the garb of Mexico, and uses the Spanish tongue. If you are not weary of life, the sooner you cross the border, the longer will be your years!"

"And you—who art thou?" earnestly asked the young woman, her blue eyes aglow as she leaned over in her saddle to bring their faces nearer together. "Only in my dreams have I ever seen a man like this! Only in my dreams—"

She stopped short, drawing back with a swift flush as Maverick Mark smiled; he could not help it, under the circumstances. All that he had done seemed but a matter of course to him, but he saw that this girl—she really seemed that in years, if not in form and development—looked upon him as little less than a marvel.

"Who am I, you ask, señorita?" something akin to sadness coming into his voice as that smile quickly faded away. "Nobody, from nowhere! A wandering wretch who has no name, no home, no country, even! On only one point have I the advantage of you: I am safe in this region, while you are in deadly peril, woman though you are!"

"You mean?" hesitated the stranger.

"That there has been a raid of robbers from your side of the border, and at least one honest man has been brutally shot down, to—"

"I didn't—"

"I know you didn't do it," swiftly interposed the Texan. "I know you are innocent of all wrong-doing, but others might not stop to think or listen to reason, once they caught sight of the hated garb you wear. And so—if you love life or liberty, you will seek home and friends without a minute's delay."

"But since I have done nothing to deserve punishment, señor?" at the same time drawing her graceful figure proudly erect.

"Would it be the first time an innocent being suffered for what the guilty had done?" quickly asked Maverick Mark, his eyes glowing as they strove to hold hers fixed. "It is known that a

woman bore the raiders company, for she was present when that dastardly shot was fired to down a good man. And so—to escape being mistaken for that woman, señorita, I repeat my advice: make all haste across the border, since there your best friends must reside."

An unsteady tug at the lasso in his hand caused Maverick Mark to turn toward the captive Mexican, who was once more rising to his feet, sorely shaken, yet seemingly without material injury to limb or body.

"And this—this man?" hesitated the young woman, as though that movement had recalled the Mexican to memory.

"Well, I reckon he'll make a neat hanging-bee for the boys!"

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE RIDE.

In this, as in much which had gone before, Maverick Mark was playing a part, as will be revealed in good time. But neither of those whose ears caught his slow, speculative speech, for an instant doubted his complete sincerity.

The captive shrunk back with a hissing breath, the young woman recoiled a bit, turning pale once more. But she quickly rallied, speaking rapidly while leaning toward the young Texan.

"Señor, you are no hangman! Is it not enough that you have thrice conquered this—this man?"

"Enough for me, but—does he look as though he was satisfied?" laughingly retorted the nameless man.

"Give me my knife, and I'll cut—"

"Silence!" sharply cried the young woman. "Another threat, and I will leave thee to pay the full penalty. But, you, señor," her voice softening as one gloved hand reached out to lightly touch the Texan. "You should not play hangman, even to one like he!"

"The cowboys will save me that trouble, señorita. I never saw men enjoy themselves so entirely as they do while stretching the neck of a stock-thief!"

"But this man is not— Did I not save you from a shot, señor?"

"And probably saved my life at the same time, señorita" with a grateful bow. "I am deeply in your debt for that, at least."

"Would you pay that debt, señor?" her voice trembling with poorly-masked eagerness.

"Only show me how, and you have my answer, señorita."

"'Tis easy to show you that, señor," with a low, glad laugh, but growing serious again while adding: "Give me this man, to dispose of as my will dictates, señor!"

"He is at your disposal, señorita," bowed Maverick, but with an unusually grave expression on his manly countenance as he added: "But I could wish you had asked for a more valuable article. As it is, may I ask what you intend doing with the fellow?"

"Punishing him!"

"I'll cheerfully relieve you of that necessity, señorita."

"No! Mine was the wrong, mine must be the hand that metes out punishment! Hold him fast, señor, while I recover his horse, yonder!" the next instant galloping off toward a saddled and bridled horse which was dimly visible now, having grazed up a slope behind which he had been concealed.

Through all this rapid interchange of words, the Mexican had remained silent, only his swiftly-changing gaze betraying his deep interest in the affair. Nor did he break silence now, though Maverick Mark was coolly looking him over, from crown to sole.

Under ordinary circumstances the Mexican would have been considered a fine-looking fellow, after a reckless fashion—for he was well-built, his features were fairly regular, even handsome, while the gaudy colors of jacket, shirt, sash and trousers, forming the national costume, agreed well with the rest.

And as Maverick Mark coolly inspected his prize, the words of Jim Branch came back to his mind. With a few minor differences, this Mexican might easily be mistaken for the Texan himself!

Experiencing little difficulty in securing the horse, the young woman was soon back, and at a sign from Maverick Mark the hampered Mexican sprang with marvelous agility into the saddle, without touching foot to stirrup.

The Texan frowned as he saw this, and there was a troubled light in his blue eyes as he handed the lasso to the woman, at the same time whispering, in tones barely loud enough for her ears to catch:

"Watch him closely, señorita! There's an ugly devil in his eyes, and you'd be safer trusting a rattlesnake than him, if he has cause to wish you ill."

"I will watch him," laughingly replied she, securing the end of the lariat to her saddle-bow. "And now—adios, señor! Pray for the repose of his soul."

A shake of the riata sent the other horse on in advance, and with a parting bow to Maverick Mark the strange girl rode away, driving the captive Mexican before her.

Only once she gave a backward glance before

vanishing amidst the deepening shades of night, and then it was to give a wave of her free hand to the Texan, who was looking over a shoulder as he rode Yellow Boy off in the opposite direction.

For some little time the couple rode on through the deepening twilight in silence, save for the regular beating of hoofs as the two animals pressed ahead at a brisk walk.

But then, turning his head for a backward glance, the Mexican spoke:

"How much longer are you thinking to carry out this wretched farce, Lota Quesado?"

"Until your punishment equals your offense, Melchoir Gayferos."

"Bah!" with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Your Texan bully is no longer within earshot, Lota. And as for my offense—what was that? Are you not my very own?"

"Not yet—not ever, if you so far forget yourself again, Don Melchoir!" was the impetuous retort. "Am I a slave so soon? Am I to meekly bow my head before your curses, your blows, even?"

"I did not strike you, Lota."

"No, because I was too quick for your hand, and you dare not repeat the stroke while my pistol was looking into your evil eyes. If you had—if that foul blow had even so much as brushed my person, Melchoir Gayferos—you would never have lived long enough to be thrice humiliated by my Texan, as you term the noble señor."

"I'll put my steel into his heart for that!"

"'Twill be through his back, then!" with a low, mocking laugh.

That taunt must have cut him deeply, yet he grew calm instead of furious, his knees giving his well-trained horse the signal to moderate its pace until the couple rode side by side.

"You drove me to fury, Lota," he said, his tones almost mild as his eyes met hers. "What if I did shoot that meddler? Is it merely to bow and pass soft words that we come to this cursed country?"

"Not to rob, to steal, to shed innocent blood!" Lota said, her voice growing husky and tremulous. "And to me—what silken lies did you pour into my foolish ears? What pains you took to make me believe—Bah! 'tis all of a piece with your evil career, Melchoir Gayferos!"

"If I lied, 'twas because your own mother bade me lie, Lota."

"I will not believe it! You dare not tell me this before her face!"

"Not until her rage has subsided after finding her child here in the enemy's country instead of safely at home," laughed the Mexican.

"Do you dare tell me—"

"I dare tell you nothing more, Lota. It may be that I have already told you too much for my own safety. But—could I drive you away when you came upon us, just as the game opened?"

Lota Quesado made no reply. She hung her head like one in deep grief as the horses pressed briskly along through the evening, as yet unlighted by the nearly full moon, though its hour for rising was not far away. And she gave no sign until Gayferos attempted to shake the lasso from his arms.

"Stop!" she cried, sternly, one hand stretching out toward him, a single star casting a brief reflection from a polished steel tube.

"You surely have carried the jest far enough, Lota?" harshly said Don Melchoir, but ceasing his efforts to free his arms. "You cannot mean to carry me thus to the very rendezvous?"

"And if I should so resolve, Don Melchoir Gayferos?"

"I'd kill every being whose eyes looked upon my shame!"

The young woman laughed softly, but her armed hand still held her captive covered. He saw this, and strove to smooth his tones, though with only partial success.

"What is it you really intend doing, señorita?"

"For one thing, give your over-hot blood ample time in which to grow cool enough for safety. And then—kill you as I would a mad wolf whose poisonous fangs were trying to tear my throat, at your first attempt to renew your brutal violence, señor!"

"If I swear by all the saints, Lota?"

"I have received your sacred oaths before, and how long were you in breaking them?"

"By your mother's order. She is my chief, Lota, and her lightest word is my law, as it should be. But now—"

"Wait. I am not ready to free your hands and return your arms. I have them here in safe-keeping, but—"

"Don't I know? Didn't I see that devil or a Texan slip them under your manga while whispering— Dare you tell me just what, Lota?"

"A warning against trusting a poisonous serpent too blindly," with a low laugh that did not take the sting out of her words. "Once more, silence! I wish to think."

Side by side they rode on through the young night, Don Melchoir no longer attempting to free his arms. Despite her words, he began to feel pretty confident that the maiden would not carry her just resentment to the extent of forc-

ing him under the eyes of those who looked up to him as their chief, lacking the presence of his one superior. As for the rest, he did not so much care. Time would bring his revenge, and it would taste all the sweeter for this uncomfortable experience.

Even yet he had not entirely recovered from the disagreeable surprise given him by Lota Quesado, joining his party just as they had gone too far to turn back in their mad exploit.

Until that instant he had thought of her—when he had time to think of aught so far away from that dangerous scene—as safe in her southern home, blissfully unconscious of all that had been plotted and planned by the Black Jaguar and himself against the enemy.

Even now he was racking his brain in search of a plausible solution. There could be but the one: their carefully guarded secret had been discovered by some person, who afterward betrayed them to Lota.

"Who could it have been? Let me discover—and I surely will, sooner or later!—the traitor, and there will be such a death of torture as centuries have not witnessed!"

And then his thoughts passed on, up to the time when the voice of that cursed Texan came to his ears, when he wheeled to see the yellow horse bearing its rider so swiftly down the hill, to—

"Ten million curses cover him with a blister!" he mentally howled, tingling from top to toe with mingled shame and impotent fury. "Only for her—only for her jerking my pistol back—I'd have sent a bullet through his black heart, and never felt his hands—"

Even in thought he could not complete that shameful sentence. He fought against the picture that floated across his brain, but in vain. He had to view it all—had to see himself handled like he might handle an unruly boy—he, who had, until that bitter black hour, justly prided himself on his great strength, his skill at all athletic sports. He, who had boasted time and time again that the whole world could not produce his equal, much less his master!

Truly, he was being punished, though hardly after the fashion Lota Quesado had in view when she uttered those words.

"Don Melchoir Gayferos," abruptly spoke the young woman, after a considerable time had passed thus, "swear by the sacred cross that you will abandon your evil plans from this hour. Swear that you will go back to your home, without delay, never again to cross the Rio Grande. Refuse, and I will take you bound into camp this night!"

"Lota Quesado, have you any friends in that camp this night?"

"You know I have; each man there is a friend."

"Then—have a care for those friends, my angel, and alter your plans. For I swear by the true cross that I will kill every man who is unfortunate enough to see me, Melchoir Gayferos, captive to a girl!"

Clear, cold, unaccented came those words, but she who heard them was able to read below the surface. And once more they proceeded in silence until, from out the gloom, there came a trampling of hoofs!

"Quick, Lota! Set me free, or if those are Texans, you shall share my doom, as the child of the hated Black Jaguar!" he hissed, swiftly.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE JAGUAR'S FIRST VICTIM.

KNEES of one and hand of the other had checked their mounts the very second that warning echo came to their ears through the gloom. The same peril occurred to innocent as to guilty, but Don Melchoir Gayferos was swiftest to put it into words.

He knew that his life would not be worth five minutes' purchase, if those as yet unseen riders should prove to be cowboys, sent abroad by tidings of stampede or raid, once his face or costume declared him one of the detested race.

Knowing this, even while hissing that half-threat, half-entreaty into the ear of his companion, he was trying to free his arms from the fastenings applied by the Man from Nowhere.

Breathlessly Lota Quesado listened, leaning forward in the saddle until her golden locks mingled with the mane of her pricked-eared steed, trying to estimate the force ahead by noting the number of hoofstrokes.

They were not numerous; she took time enough to learn so much. They were not headed directly toward herself and Gayferos, but angling sharply across the course she had been following, and only for the protection lent them by the sides of a narrow depression between two land-waves, up which they had been riding, their coming would have been discovered before this.

"Silence!" whispered Lota, leaning toward Gayferos and aiding him to free his arms. "Not a word—not a move—and only shoot when they have fairly—"

In his eagerness to recover full use of his limbs, Don Melchoir forgot to maintain that warning pressure of his knees, and his horse, even keener-sensed than its master, tossed its head and gave vent to a sharp, challenging neigh.

A scorching curse burst from the Mexican's lips. Lota thrust a revolver into his partially liberated hands, then cast off the lasso from her own saddle-bow. But before either could do more, from out the shadowy gloom there came a sharp, startled call:

"*¡Hala! quien vive!*"

Swift as thought Don Melchoir lifted his one free hand to his mouth, sending forth a wild, mournful, yet indescribably fierce wail; the yell of the Mexican tiger.

Several cries, more or less perfect imitations, came back, but all from the one direction, and that completed the recognition. The, as yet, unseen horsemen were friends, not enemies.

"Keep them in play until I can shake off this cursed *riata*!" Don Melchoir hastily muttered, his knee-pressure sending his horse backward instead of ahead.

The maiden complied willingly enough. She felt that her punishment at least equaled his sin, so far as it affected herself, and knowing the desperate character of the man so well, she cared not to urge him to extremity.

She sent her horse forward to join the party, an even half-dozen in all, and that including a captive.

"Tis you, señorita?" ejaculated one of their number, in strong surprise, as he recognized that feminine figure. "We thought—you used the captain's signal, and so—"

"Don Melchoir answered your hail, señor," was her interposition. "He is back yonder. Possibly through mercy. Possibly giving his just anger a chance to cool before facing you."

"Anger?" echoed the fellow, shrinking visibly.

"Are you not in the enemy's country? Is not our watchword eternal vigilance? Yet—how long do you think your captain was sitting out yonder counting your steps, laughing in his heart as he whispered me softly how differently his gallant braves would act! How clumsy and blind, how awkward and deaf were those heretical Tejanos! And then—only for one brute recognizing another, through instinct keener than even the eagle eyes of your chief—"

"Death would have wiped out your faults forever, mole-eyed Pepe!" came the cold, stern tones of Don Melchoir Gayferos as he appeared, no longer a captive, but a master.

The frightened knave mumbled something by way of excuse, but Gayferos paid no attention to his words. His keen eyes had taken note of that hampered figure in their midst, and pressing nearer he roughly pushed that drooping head backward, meaning to let the starlight fall upon the prisoner's face.

Only to recoil with an involuntary ejaculation as the prisoner tried to catch hand or finger between his teeth, his jaws closing with a savage dash as the effort failed.

"Get out, you infernal Greaser!" cried a voice which was plainly American. "I'd sooner try teeth on carrion, but you curs have tied my hands too tight for—Turn 'em loose, and I'll clean out the gang!"

With a swift, deft movement Don Melchoir buried his fingers in that crop of curls, left unprotected, since the stranger's hat lay near where he had been pounced upon by the Rustlers.

A vigorous effort forced that head back, and for a single breath the Mexican gazed keenly and exultantly into the captive's face by the starlight.

A viciously-triumphant joy rung in his laugh as he drew back to clasp the hand of the fellow whom he had addressed as "mole-eyed Pepe."

"And I felt like cursing you, only now! Forgive me, *compadre*! See! I embrace thee—I call thee brother!"

"Tis the right bird, then, captain?" spluttered the overjoyed Mexican, as soon as the theatric performance came to an end. "I have not made another clumsy blunder?"

"Thou art a marvel of perfection, Pepe Martillo! Thou art—Yes, one of the accursed breed," his manner changing, his tones lowering, though that savage exultation still echoed through each word that passed his lips. "Tell me how you came across him so opportunely, and how you managed—But, no!" breaking off with almost nervous abruptness and pressing across to where Lota Quesado was quietly watching and waiting, to grasp her nearest arm and utter:

"You understand, Lota? 'Tis one of the foul breed for whose annihilation your mother so often bade you pray! 'Tis one—"

"And only one," coldly interposed the young woman, freeing her arm as he would have led her forward. "Only one, while we are seven! I wonder not that you seem unable to realize such a glorious victory, Don Melchoir!"

But her sharp tongue had lost its power to wound the Rustler leader for the present. Such was his vicious delight over that capture, his lady-love might work her tongue raw at his expense if she liked!

Still, he made no further attempt to make Lota share in his gloating over the prisoner, and as she rode away into the gloom, he gave the word that set the little squad in motion toward the same quarter.

As they rode along, Pepe Martillo told how he

had captured their prize, but he made far too long a story of it to find place here. For, after all, when stripped of its voluble verbiage, it amounted to nothing more meritorious than a streak of pure good-luck on his part. The Texan had blindly run into their very arms, and his capture only cost the cast of a single *riata*.

Don Melchoir seemed to find that recital thrilling enough, however, and his eager questions kept Martillo's tongue wagging through nearly all the remainder of that ride, which did not come to an end until the almost round moon was well above the horizon.

As they drew near their present destination, the nature of the ground began to change. Here and there rose little clumps of trees, at times out of a seemingly barren soil, at others nourished by a surface spring, instead of underground waters.

The surface was still comparatively level, though an occasional gully, draw or *coulee*, broke the monotony. These were easily enough skirted or crossed by the light of the moon, and as their journey drew near its end, Don Melchoir left Pepe Martillo and joined Lota Quesado.

"Still dreaming of your gallant Texan, Lota?" he half-sneeringly asked, the evil passions set astir by the capture rendering him reckless beyond the ordinary. "Are you wondering where he is now? What if I were to tell you that he is yonder poor wretch?" with a backward toss of his head that indicated the prisoner.

"You would lie, as you have ever lied. 'Tis not my gallant Texan. If it were so—bah! in place of mocking him, you would be risking your halter-fit neck in fear-blind flight!"

Don Melchoir gave a discomfited snarl, and fell back a pace or two. Like many a better man, he realized his folly in taking up woman's weapon, too late to spare his self complacency.

A few minutes more brought them to the rendezvous, where a number of well-armed, gaudily-clad knaves were gathered about a brisk fire, some eating while others cooked, but all springing to "attention," when Don Melchoir gave his well-known signal: the call of the jaguar.

There were plenty of hands to take care of the horses, but Gayferos himself looked after the prisoner, cutting the stout thongs that bound him to the saddle, keeping one fierce hand on his shoulder until he was bound to a slender tree in a sitting posture, where the ruddy glow of the camp-fire fell squarely upon his front.

Don Melchoir glanced toward Lota when this task was accomplished, but her back was turned that way, and she showed no curiosity whatever concerning the prisoner. And yet, spite of that, she had almost breathlessly watched her chance to win one fair look at that face; and a great weight seemed to lift from her heart as she saw—not Maverick Mark, but a stranger to her, though not to us: Eugene Cannon!

For several minutes Don Melchoir stood with folded arms before the captive rancher, devilish joy glittering in his eyes and rendering his face really repulsive. He seemed testing the power of his will; he mentally commanded those eyes to lift to his own; but his hot temper would not permit his trial to last long.

"Dog of a Texan! Do you fear to look upon the face of a man?"

"Send for one, and I'll show you," sneered Cannon.

"He stands before you, and—"

"I see only a cowardly cur, who has stolen clothes to cover his mangy hide. Bah! slink to your kennel, hound!"

Don Melchoir uttered a vicious oath, bending with clinched hand to smite these mocking lips. But before the blow could fall, a hand caught his arm, swinging its owner partly around, to front a glowing face, full of angry scorn and reproof.

"Are you all coward, Melchoir Gayferos?" sharply cried Lota Quesado. "Dare you ever more manly act than to strike an enemy whose hands are bound, or whose back is turned toward you?"

"Don't lower yourself to this vile level by scolding the dog, señorita," said the young Texan, in Spanish. "He dare not strike me while my eyes are open. Cowardly cur is written all over his face!"

Instead of giving full vent to his evil passions, Don Melchoir caught the maiden by an arm, laughing softly as he drew her away from the tree to which the prisoner was bound. And, thinking to spare the helpless man, Lota bore him company without resistance.

Passing the fire, where fresh viands were being prepared for the latest comers, Don Melchoir paused beneath a tree, where the grass was thick enough to afford a grateful seat, sinking down thereon, and signing Lota to imitate his example.

For some little time he maintained silence, now staring at vacancy, now gazing with a half-troubled expression into her beautiful face. But then he spoke abruptly:

"Have you forgotten everything, Lota Quesado? Have you so soon forgotten the sacred vows you took while kneeling before the altar with your mother's hand clasping yours? Have you so soon forgotten how her early life was marred, her present darkened, her future blast-

ed? Have you forgotten whose hand brought all this to pass?"

"I have forgotten nothing, Melchoir Gayferos."

"Yet—you insult a true friend, to spare a false enemy! For that man yonder is one of the devil's spawn! His father's hands placed the death-noose about the throat of Seraphin Quesado, and he was—"

That fiercely impetuous speech was abruptly broken in upon by a shrill yell of discovery, followed closely by the sounds of a death-grapple between bitter enemies!

CHAPTER XIV.

A DANGEROUS UNDERTAKING.

"LOSING a minnow to catch a whale! But—will I get the right sort of bite?"

Maverick Mark asked himself that question as he mounted Yellow Boy and cast a swift glance after those receding shapes, already rendered indistinct by the rapidly-deepening shades of evening.

He turned his horse in a direction contrary to that taken by Lota Quesado and her seeming prisoner, partly because his charge had come from that quarter, partly to make those two think he had neither wish nor expectation of ever again crossing their path.

He rode slowly until he saw that Lota was looking back, then gave Yellow Boy free rein, breaking into a gallop that quickly carried him across the swell from the other slope of which he had first sighted man and woman in their quarrel.

"Will they turn back for a parting glimpse, I wonder?" he asked himself, letting Yellow Boy pick his own way, looking back with eyes roving along that grassy crest. "He'd be mighty apt to, if his hands were free and could grip a six! But she?"

On that point he was less assured. Lota had seemed very grateful to him, not only for saving her from brutal violence, but for the deep interest—not altogether simulated, by the way—he had shown in urging her to escape still other perils.

"I reckon the little girl swallowed it all as Gospel, but—well, the man *may* live who can always hit 'em right off, but I've never had the pleasure of making his acquaintance."

Maverick Mark laughed softly at that grim reflection, and as that crest grew dim in the distance, without his seeing anything to confirm his suspicions, he touched the reins, veering to the right, curving around in such a manner as would shortly give him an unobstructed view of the direction taken by Lota and her sulky captive.

As hinted, the Texan had been playing a part during that exciting episode other than appeared on the surface.

At the first glance he knew he was looking upon the young woman described by Jim Branch, the wounded cowboy, as being one of the party which he had mistaken for friends until a pistol-bullet convinced him of his nearly fatal error. And, knowing this much, what more natural than for him to wish to gain still more important information?

Although the young woman looked far too honest, too innocent of all wrong-doing to be one of an evil gang like that collected by the Black Jaguar to help carry out the stern vendetta she had vowed against all who had taken part in the execution of Seraphin Quesado, and Creed Cannon in particular, Maverick Mark had seen enough in his wild life to know that all is not pure gold that glisters.

"She looks like an angel, but looks are mighty deceiving!" he had told himself, while rapidly shaping his plans under those gratefully-beaming eyes of blue.

He failed to recognize Melchoir Gayferos as having crossed his life-path before, but it needed no more than a single keen glance at his face to rightly estimate his character. If not one of the Black Jaguar's cubs, he was no better. Rustler proclaimed itself in every line of his strong face, in his dress, his arms, in his very likeness to the man who thus summed him up. For, beyond the possibility of a doubt, he must be the man whom Jim Branch had singled out as the leader of the gang of stampedeers.

If he had been captured while alone, or in other company than that of the golden-haired girl, Maverick Mark would have taken him with halter about his neck, for summary trial at the hands of the first cowboy band he could find; but as it was, he adroitly led up to the proposal made by Lota, secretly rejoicing when she asked charge of the fellow.

He believed that they had formed part of the band whose trail he had followed until it divided, though he knew now that neither of their horses had made the peculiarly-shaped track which he selected after that division took place.

Still, if belonging to that band, they would almost certainly make all haste to rejoin it at the rendezvous, when once convinced that the Texan was not attempting to dog their steps.

This was why Maverick Mark acted as he did. And this was why he rode away from, instead of directly after those receding shapes.

He touched up Yellow Boy as he lost sight of that crest, putting the admirably-trained crea-

ture to a low, level pace, in which action those lightly-skimming hoofs gave forth hardly an echo as they struck the ground.

He crossed the gentle rise at a point where it had sunk so low as to be hardly distinguishable from the level beyond, leaning low in his saddle as he keenly scanned the stretch thus opened up to his vision.

He saw nothing to disturb him, as that low, chuckling laugh bore witness. The prairie was free from horse or rider, and he knew now that his scheme had succeeded thus far.

"They didn't turn back! The little girl is still the gray mare, so far as that outfit is concerned. Now—will they keep a-going? Or are they even smarter than I credited them with being?"

That remained to be proved, and Maverick Mark at once set about applying the test.

"If they've got sharper eyes than mine, then they ought to wear feathers for clothes, and horns for ornaments!" he chuckled, riding along in a course parallel to that taken by the Mexicans when he last saw them. "And if I can't sight them before they do me, it's high time I resigned my commission as a night-rider!"

For perhaps half a mile Maverick Mark pressed on at a tolerable pace without changing his line, bending low over Yellow Boy's neck and keenly scanning the higher ground lying on the right hand. But at the end of that time, having seen nothing of his game, he gradually veered to the right, meaning to strike the trail itself.

Another man might have overrun the spoor, faint as that was, with the darkness settling lower and heavier, but not so the sharp-eyed Texan. He caught sight of it while a score feet away, and after one more glance around, he left the saddle and sprang along the trail afoot, giving a silent signal which Yellow Boy seemed to fully comprehend.

The horse slackened its pace, ambling along in the rear of its master, barely lifting its hoofs clear of the ground as they moved forward, seemingly shod with felt.

"Straight on, just as though they were going somewhere!" chuckled Maverick Mark, hugely pleased with his experience thus far. "Dollars to cents the little girl thinks me too mighty white to play spy on a lady, while the Greaser—well, he's too mighty mad to even think!"

Even if Lota Quesado had led that hunt at speed, she would have found it no easy matter to have left that light-footed spy behind. As it was, Maverick Mark caught his next glimpse of the pair he was dogging in hopes of making a still more important discovery, just when Melchoir Gayferos forced his horse to slacken its pace, for its master to open the conversation which has already been recorded.

After that discovery, it was a comparatively easy matter for Maverick Mark to keep his game in sight. Or, if not always visible, within his power to make them so at very short notice.

"It's all coming my way, just as I figured it out in advance!" he told himself, with pardonable pride. "They're making for a halting-place, and if that was further off, they'd be riding heap sight faster. And if they didn't expect to join a pretty strong force, be sure they wouldn't be feeling so easy, in this section, and after the ugly bobbery they've helped to kick up."

Maverick Mark was near enough to catch the sound of other hoofstrokes, even earlier than Don Melchoir did, though his hearing was aided by his being afoot, without the thump and jar of a horse's feet beneath to bother him.

He was hardly less uneasy than the Rustler, until that challenge in the Spanish tongue rung forth upon the night air; but when the two parties joined company, riding on at a brisk pace, he once more resumed his shadowing, not a whit troubled by having such heavy odds before him.

"I could get away with their baggage, if it came to that, but I'd heap sight rather not! I want to find out just how big a gang there is, and find out I'm going to—or lose a leg!"

His desire to avoid discovery kept Maverick Mark too far in the rear for him to note the presence of a prisoner, and when that risky journey seemed near its end—when he caught sight of a dull glow as of a fire reflected on a patch of timber some little distance in advance—the daring spy slackened his pace until the hand he reached behind him was touched by the warm muzzle of his horse.

Kneeling there, still watching those phantom-like shapes as they grew dimmer with increasing distance, Maverick Mark patted Yellow Boy on the nose, whispering words of warning much as he might have instructed a human companion. And then, as a finger tapped a foreleg, the dun horse gently sunk to the ground, lying at ease, making no motion as his master silently glided away along the now invisible trail.

Maverick Mark made sure his quarry was entering the timber patch, but after catching a glimpse of the light, making certain it was a camp-fire, built for the night, he went back to his horse, bidding Yellow Boy arise, then leading him away to a still more favorable position.

He was resolved to learn all that could be

found out concerning those who had started that camp-fire, and he was experienced enough to know that he was undertaking a really dangerous job. If raiders, as everything seemed to indicate, their senses would be on the keen alert while in the enemy's country. If discovered—

"Well, I don't mean to be, but if I am, I can count on you to back me up, old fellow," softly laughed the reckless fellow, giving Yellow Boy the signal to lie down, as before.

Sinking flat on his stomach, Maverick Mark silently wormed his way through the short grass, gaining the edge of the timber island without attracting attention, and without seeing ought to show that guards were posted about the camp, though this he had felt almost positive would be the case.

Rather oddly, this fact caused him far more uneasiness than would have been the case had he found a regular cordon of sentinels, and his advance through the thin bushes was much slower than he had calculated before noting that seeming recklessness. It is the suspected, rather than the known peril, a man of his caliber dreads.

But those uneasy thoughts were banished once for all the instant Maverick Mark caught sight of the young man bound to the tree. One hand gripped his own throat, to smother the cry of angry wonder that struggled for utterance as he recognized Eugene Cannon in that captive.

How had he fallen into such evil hands? Where had he been captured? Surely not at Hand-cuff Ranch? Surely not—

Maverick Mark shivered from crown to sole at that thought, and he hardly breathed while searching that lighted stretch of ground. Surely, if Eloise Thornton had been captured, as well as young Cannon, she would be somewhere in sight?

Eager to learn the whole truth, Maverick Mark glided silently as a ghost through the shadows, making half the circuit of the camp before fully satisfying himself that the maiden, if captured at all, had not been brought to that spot in company with her cousin.

With his mind partly set at ease on that score, Maverick Mark paused to calmly survey the situation, noting each strong as well as weak point, counting the chances for and against success in what he fully meant to try: to rescue Eugene Cannon from bondage.

It seemed little short of suicidal, with more than a dozen well-armed men to oppose him, while Eugene would have to be cut free from the tree before he could even help himself; but having decided upon his course, Maverick Mark lost no time in getting about it.

Although the tree itself was too slender in base to fully cover his approach, Maverick hoped to creep near enough for a whisper to put Eugene on the alert, then do the rest by sheer recklessness and dash.

He had nearly gained the desired position when, with a shrill yell of vindictive discovery, a heavy knave jumped squarely upon his back, yelling for help to secure his prize. But then—with a mighty toss and heave, Maverick sent the fellow whirling through the air, to fall fairly into the center of the camp-fire!

CHAPTER XV.

A WOMAN WITHOUT MERCY.

BRIEF a time as it took Colonel Cannon to decipher those few words of writing, it gave his caller grace enough to draw another article from beneath her bronze-hued *manga*, and when the veteran uttered that choking cry the grim muzzle of a cocked revolver was staring him full in the face.

He hardly knew what words passed his lips, but, like a blow squarely in the face, came the woman's fierce answer:

"I am the Black Jaguar!"

He strove to arise, something like a bloody mist flashing before his eyes, but, before he could accomplish aught, the tube of death indented his temple and that hated voice viciously spoke:

"Quiet, or you die like a dog! Lift so much as a hand before I have told you all, and you lose your children forever!"

The threat of death alone would never have held the ranch owner in his seat, now that he began to realize that she to whose devilish hatred and untiring revenge he owed so much was fairly within reach of his vengeance; but those added words robbed his limbs of their strength almost as surely as might have done the touch of paralysis.

"My babe—my boy!" he huskily gasped, his voice but little better than a death-rattle in his throat. "Where—tell me—"

The pistol-muzzle sharply struck his lips, tingling his teeth with blood from the broken skin, as the Black Jaguar hastily muttered:

"She comes—your proud baby-face! Send her back—lie to her, if you must—but send her away, or I'll kill her without mercy!"

Even with that long-delayed feast seemingly spread for her vicious appetite, Carlita Quesado never once relaxed her caution, and her keen ears warned her of Eloise Thornton's coming in haste, doubtless having caught that stifled cry from her guardian's lips.

That strange woman sat erect in her chair,

all but the muzzle of her pistol bidden beneath the *manga*. Colonel Cannon saw that she had him covered, and could end his life by a simple crook of her finger.

Had only his own life been at stake, he might have defied her, but with none save her own hand for defense, what show would Eloise stand against this merciless fury? And then—

"Obey, or lose your children!" softly breathed the Black Jaguar, as the maiden came swiftly into the room.

"I heard—surely you called, Uncle Creed?" stopping short, gazing bewilderedly from one to the other of those quietly-seated persons.

"No, lady-bird," answered the colonel, with an evenness of tone that amazed himself. "I did not call. There is no occasion for—will you please excuse us just a little longer, deary?"

Eloise was at his side by this. She flashed a glance toward that mysterious caller, but the Black Jaguar had drawn her dangerous claws out of sight. Then the girl brushed her guardian's forehead with a kiss, under cover of which she hastily whispered:

"Send her away! She's wicked—watch her eyes!"

"If the young lady wishes to remain, I have no objection to her hearing what remains to be spoken, Colonel Cannon," slowly spoke the Black Jaguar, her English entirely free from accent.

"No, no," hastily cried the terribly hampered ranchman. "Go, Eloise, and watch for my boy! Go watch—until I call you, lady-bird!"

The maiden obeyed, feeling a little puzzled by his suppressed emotion, but far from suspecting the terrible truth. Hating the Black Jaguar as he must, it never once entered her brain as a possibility that this woman seated opposite him was she.

"Now, you devil!" hoarsely whispered Cannon, leaning partly across the little table, his eyes aglow as they tried to read the truth in that stern visage. "Tell me the truth—tell me all!"

"Is that your idea of begging a favor, Creed Cannon?"

"Tell me all, but beware how you think of lying! I'll make you die a thousand deaths in one, if you don't—"

Moving quickly forward, her fingers struck his lips spitefully, her eyes seeming to glow with an unholy light through the growing twilight.

"Whine, not bark, you dog! Beg, not threaten, vile assassin! 'Tis for me to speak and for you to listen, answering back only when permission is granted you. Now—what is the favor you humbly crave?"

"My children—you said on this—" mumbled Cannon, too deeply shaken to even feel angry at those insulting words.

His fingers trembled violently as they groped around in quest of that slip of paper containing such marvelous tidings. Marvelous if true! But—could that be possible? Had he not seen—

"You are lying to me, you merciless devil!" he gasped, hoarsely, something of his wonted strength returning with that thought. "If my children are yet alive, why did you send that—"

Carlita Quesado did not cut his sentence short this time. His throat seemed to grow together, and that word, calling back the day of deathly agony so long ago, bringing up a picture of that awful spectacle—his wife, fainting across an opened coffin, half-filled with the still partly clothed skeletons of two children—seemed to stop his fountain of speech for all time.

"Whom else should I send it to, Creed Cannon?" mocked the Black Jaguar, gloating over her vengeance much as her sleek prototype might eye the victim under its cruel claws before sinking teeth through the still pulsing jugulars. "To whom but their mourning parents could such a rare gift be sent?"

"Then—did that—that thing lie, or are these written words false?" the tortured ranchman asked to speak.

"How much would you give to have your doubts forever set at rest on that score, Creed Cannon?" mocked his enemy, her head leaning further across the table the more plainly to read his sufferings through his face. "Did I lie when I said I could coax you into setting a price on this vast domain of yours, most noble executioner?"

"You lied then, in playing friendship. You may—you must be lying now, though I'd give all the world besides to think different!"

The ranch owner spoke rapidly, with something of his old powers, but, with the last word, his head sunk upon his arms as they rested on the table before him. Shivers ran through his frame in little waves. He seemed utterly broken down by this totally unexpected blow from a hated hand; but the Black Jaguar, herself such an adept at deception, drew back a little, standing on guard, as her next words plainly proved.

"Carefully, Creed Cannon! If I have thrust my head between your wolfish jaws, be sure I have a hostage. If harm comes to me, or if I do not return before a certain date, your children shall pay the penalty!"

"My children are dead!" moaned the ranch-

man, without lifting his head. "You sent back their bones—"

"Not *theirs*, Creed Cannon, but others!"

"It not—why did you send them?"

"To partially wipe out the bitter black score marked up against your name, dog of the devil!" fiercely hissed the woman. "To deal your black heart one blow, while preparing for another and still more deadly stroke of vengeance! To show you what a vendetta means when pronounced by the lips of a pure-blooded—"

The Black Jaguar broke off abruptly, turning her head in the direction in which Eloise had vanished. As though just suspecting the possibility of an eavesdropper, she silently crossed the room and convinced herself that fear was unfounded. Then, parting the curtains which obscured the twilight falling across the table, she returned to her former position, watching that bowed head as she spoke again:

"Hearken to my words, spawn of the foul fiend! Listen while thy mistress turns back a leaf from the past, to show what sins your vile hand and viler heart committed before that vendetta was sworn against you and yours!"

A brief pause, during which Colonel Cannon lay motionless, save for an occasional shiver and faint moan. Carlita Quesado seemed gathering her thoughts, calming her fierce passions, for when she spoke next it was in low, even, almost monotonous tones:

"I was happy, then. My step barely bent the grass-blades, my voice fooled the birds into looking for a mate far gayer and happier than they. I had no cares to vex, no troubles to untangle, no grief to be washed away in tears. But that was, oh, so many long years ago!"

"Among other blessings, I had Seraphin Quesado. Not my husband, as I once made you believe, dog of dogs, but my brother, whose eyes first saw the light on the same day that witnessed my birth. Do you know what *that* means? Can you even begin to guess how near and dear a tie joins twin to twin, even among your ice-blooded people? Think, then, how we loved—Seraphin and Carlita!"

"Then—bitter black clouds came to hide the sun! You know what is meant by that, Creed Cannon! You know—Bah!" with fierce anger breaking through that shallow calm. "Why should I pick and choose my words so carefully? Even now you cannot comprehend; you call sin one thing, we of my people call yet another crime. And so—I avow it!"

"My brother was a—what you call Rustler, to-day! He took from our enemies, to provide for our friends. He made the rich help support the poor. He was—"

"The worst stock-thief even Mexico could give birth to!" cried Colonel Cannon, lifting his head, his face showing haggard and aged by that dim light.

"Denunciation from your lips is precious praise, dog of all dogs!" retorted the Black Jaguar. "If Seraphin— But he cannot!" her tone altering abruptly once more. "He is dead! I buried him—I, with these unaided hands! And you—you blew out his light, Creed Cannon!"

"I did, if you mean the miserable wretch you lied me into giving you, as his carcass dropped from the gallows where simple justice had hung him by the neck!"

"'Twas the blackest of all foul crimes!"

"'Twas simple justice," repeated the ranch-owner, gaining in coolness what his caller lost. "We caught him red-handed, hardly his own length away from the corpse of his latest victim. We gave him a fair trial, and out of scores of mouths he was proven too vile to live. But with all his crimes—and they seemed legions—we showed him more grace than he could ask; we granted him what he denied his last victim: time to breathe a prayer before death!"

"Your lips pronounced that death-sentence, Creed Cannon!"

"They did," with increasing firmness. "I knew that he was guilty, because my hands took him prisoner. For that very reason I gave him more grace than one of his vile breed ever received before when caught in the very act. But with all the evidence piled up against him, to say nothing of his own fatal admissions while begging for life—"

"You lie when you hint that Seraphin turned craven, even under the shadow of an undeserved gallows!" hoarsely panted the Black Jaguar.

"I am speaking the simple truth, whether you believe me or not, and I repeat: Seraphin Quesado condemned himself in his wild fear of death. And so—I pronounced sentence upon him. I saw it executed. And if I had it all to go through with again, the result would be the same."

"Even though you knew the full penalty?" hissed the Black Jaguar, her eyes actually glittering like those of the beast she was called after.

An involuntary groan rose to the lips of the old man, but he cut it short in its birth, forcing out the words:

"It was an act of justice!"

"If you had known what a terrible price you would be called upon to pay for executing that

act of justice, would you have pronounced sentence so glibly, Creed Cannon?" persisted the woman.

"Ay! and more!" with sudden fierceness, his head going back, his hands clenching tightly as they quivered before her face. "If I *had* known, I would have strung the sister up beside the thief and assassin, to share his fate!"

A low, mocking laugh answered that fierce outburst, and the Black Jaguar leaned carelessly back in her seat as she calmly uttered:

"Time was when I would have seared the vile lips that spoke ill of Seraphin Quesado, but now—there are worse punishments than death, and I have learned how to tear a heart open without ending life; your children shall pay me the debt their father owes!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TORTURING A FATHER.

THE Black Jaguar rose quickly to her feet as she uttered those words, and Colonel Cannon instinctively drew back a bit, like one who anticipates a foul stroke.

"Bah! poor fool!" laughed his enemy, noting that movement and reading it aright. "Have I spoken so poorly that even yet you fail to see how sacred is your flickering spark of light in my eyes? Stir not; I need no servant to aid me in perfecting my own pleasure!"

Striking a match, she ignited the oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling, then crossed the room to draw the curtains close. But through it all her glittering eyes never left that seated figure for more than an instant at a time.

Even if Creed Cannon wished to turn the tables on her through violence, he was not granted even the ghost of a chance.

But he did not—just then. Although he had affected to disbelieve what those few written words declared, he could not entirely resign that new-born hope.

That hideous gift but a lie! His children still living! His noble boy, his sweet little baby girl! God! if it might only prove true!

And so it came to pass that the Black Jaguar accomplished all this, and returned to her former position without his lifting a finger to punish her, without lifting his voice in a call for help.

And yet, the last is easily accounted for. As he had told Eloise, their one house-servant, the cook, had received permission to spend the night with her mother, who was lying ill, at home; one of the little cabins erected nearly half a mile distant, for the cowboys and other hands employed on Hand-cuff Ranch. And doubtless Eugene had taken all able-bodied men with him when he rode away to do neighborly duty.

Only Eloise Thornton could have heard and answered his call for help, and if for no other reason, he would have kept silence under even worse torture, rather than bring her into such vile and dangerous company as this.

"That is better—much better!" nodded Black Jaguar, with a low, mocking laugh, leaning back in her seat while coolly scanning that deeply-lined face across the little table. "I always liked to see the face of the being I honored with my conversation, and just now yours has an especial charm for my old eyes!"

"You are not a Mexican, Carlita Quesado!" suddenly said the old soldier, though this was not the first time that suspicion struck him.

"Why do you think so?"

"You speak the English language far too fluently for a Mexican, for one thing, and then—"

"Whether I am or no, concerns you not," interrupted the Black Jaguar, impatiently. "Enough that I am Carlita Quesado, twin sister to the gallant gentleman whose life you took by foully assassinating him! You who would have died in a spasm of fright had you ever met him while a free man!"

"We did meet thus, shortly before your lamented brother's death," the ranch-owner said, with the ghost of a smile flitting across his thin visage. "But—let that pass. You said at the start that you called on business. Isn't it about time you began?"

"I thought I had made a very handsome beginning," laughed the Black Jaguar, maliciously. "However, I am open to correction. So—how much can you afford to pay for reliable information concerning your children?"

"I have but one," slowly replied Cannon, holding his emotions down with an iron will as he slowly rallied from that heavy shock this vengeful woman had administered. "I have but one child left, and he is now a man, not a poor, helpless cripple like me."

"I know," with a curt nod. "I have seen the one you mean."

"Only from hiding, then!" flashed the father, his eyes beginning to glow. "You can front a cripple, trusting to that helplessness, and to the fact that his roof shelters your head, but 'tis a different thing to face a man like Eugene Cannon!"

"You think so?" drawled the Black Jaguar, insolently.

"If I am wrong, prove me so! Wait here until his return, and I'll give you an introduction to my son—my sole remaining prop!"

The woman laughed again, slowly, meaningly, then said:

"We both might grow weary of waiting for that home-coming, colonel, but should the young gentleman really surprise us before our little matter of business is satisfactorily arranged, I'll remind you of your pledge. Knowing *two* of your children so intimately, naturally increases my interest in a third scion!"

"There were three—there is but one—*now!*" muttered Cannon, something of his former weakness flashing over him again.

"Then this?" said the woman, again placing that slip of paper on the table where his eyes could fall upon its contents. "Have you no questions to ask concerning what it asserts, Creed Cannon?"

His shivering fingers caused the paper to tremble like an aspen leaf as he picked it up, once more reading those brief sentences.

If he might only feel sure those words told no more than the glad truth! If he could only feel sure—but that was impossible!

"What do you hope to gain by bringing me such a lie as this?" he asked, slowly, each word formed with difficulty.

"I bring you no lie, Creed Cannon," declared the Black Jaguar, her gaze riveted upon those sunken eyes. "I swear to you I am telling you the simple truth. I prepared that paper lest I should fail in my efforts to secure a private interview with you, knowing that, even though you tried to disbelieve, hope would lead you to seek me out for a more perfect understanding. And so—I repeat: your two children are yet in the land of the living!"

"If you were a friend, I might believe, but being what you are—I still declare you must be lying!"

With a swift motion of a hand, Carlita Quesado brought forth an ebony and ivory crucifix from her bosom, kissing it audibly before speaking again:

"You charged me with being no Mexican, but you cannot deny that I am a true Catholic. And now—on my oath, Creed Cannon, your two children whom I stole away from your then happy home, are alive and hearty this very instant."

Swift as thought the old soldier sprung to his feet, his hands shooting forth to close upon her throat, shaking the powerful woman as though but an image of straw, as he snarled:

"Where? tell me where my children are, or I'll tear your black heart out, and make you eat it!"

He had submitted so long, had shown such poor will under all her biting taunts, that Carlita Quesado, for once in her life, was caught entirely off her guard. Those still muscular fingers were about her neck before she could draw back, and though she might, even then, save her life by taking his, thanks to the deadly weapons in the silken sash about her middle, she never once thought of taking such a desperate step.

It might save her life, but in taking his, her long-cherished vendetta would come to an untimely end.

"Back—dog!" she gasped, with difficulty.

"Kill me—they die!"

If a sledge-hammer had fallen upon his temple, Colonel Cannon could not have recoiled more suddenly. His unnerved fingers fell away from that bruised neck, and only for the chair that received his limp form, he must have fallen heavily to the floor.

With hardly a glance in his direction, Black Jaguar sprung lightly across the room, bending her head in listening. Not a sound to indicate another alarm on the part of the maiden who had once before interrupted her vengeance. And so, more dangerous than ever, the unsexed woman crept back to still further play with her victim.

"Poor, miserable cur!" were her first words, after resuming her seat, gazing contemptuously upon that broken man across the table. "Do you know how near you came to sealing, not only your own ruin, but that of your children: you have mourned over so long? If you had killed me, as you intended, what then?"

"I was mad. You drove me mad," muttered Cannon, huskily.

"Mad, indeed! Lest such another crazy fit overtakes you, let me add yet another bit of truth: I alone hold the secret of your children's identity, and that secret dies with me, unless—unless you and I can agree on terms of surrender, my gallant soldier!"

"What terms?"

"That depends. First beg my pardon for having laid your thrice-cursed hands upon my person!"

"That surely ought to be punishment enough in itself," the veteran laughed, grimly, beginning to rally once more. "They will never lose the foul taint. Never, though I love them until the river turns foul as your black heart itself!"

Instead of showing anger, the Black Jaguar laughed, soft and low her tones actually musical after their fashion. She knew that, under his show of courage, Creed Cannon was suffering as few men have suffered without death coming to their relief. And in that torment,

she was beginning to reap the rich harvest she had promised herself while swearing that grim vendetta over the corpse of her twin brother.

"That is better, my snarling cur!" with a mocking bow of approval. "I was beginning to find it very tame sport, chastising a spaniel, too timid even to make a show of its teeth."

"Don't crowd me too far, or you may feel those teeth, to your cost."

"Only to cheat your mad snarlings, as I did but a minute ago," with a repetition of that laugh. "But this is not strictly business, my dear colonel, and business brought me here. Once again, I ask you what price do you set upon your entire property in Texas?"

Instead of replying as expected, Colonel Cannon drew back a little from the table, his hands sinking into his lap, a dogged expression coming into his face.

"You still refuse to name a sum?" persisted the Black Jaguar.

"I still refuse. My property is not for sale, at any price."

"You value it even above the lives of your two children—children when the Black Jaguar stole them from your happy home, but now man and woman grown! Even above those children, I repeat?"

"Not if those children were living, but—"

"Shall I kiss the holy cross once more?"

"If you were sitting at the point of death, would you wish to kiss that relic?" slowly asked the ranchero, his deep-set eyes filling with a strangely lurid light as they gazed into hers.

"That has naught to do with my question, Creed Cannon," sharply retorted the Black Jaguar, but keenly watching her enemy, as though she more than half anticipated another outburst of dangerous passion.

And she was right in this, though it came in quite another shape than the one before.

"Then kiss the cross, you demon!" cried Cannon, in low, stern tones. "For I have you covered, and at your slightest effort to rise or draw a weapon, I'll shoot you down as I might a mad-dog!"

That was the secret of his change of position, but even though she knew he was speaking the simple truth, just now, Carlita Quesado never flinched. Instead, a cold, sneering smile crept into her dark face.

"You mean to assassinate me, as you murdered my twin brother?"

"I mean to force the whole truth from your lips before you move an inch from your present position," was the cold, stern retort. "I swear it! Move an inch, and you die!"

"And by that shot forever seal the doom of your lost children?"

"They are dead and buried, years ago. But if you cannot prove different, you will never leave that chair alive!"

"You think so?"

"I know it!"

Those words were still upon his lips when the Black Jaguar gave a signal with her eyes, to one who was prompt to obey. Two strong hands caught and disarmed the desperate veteran, without exploding his pistol, then the giant form of Pablo Acosta stood beside him, a glittering knife held with its keen point touching his throat as his head was rudely forced backward.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAD WOMAN'S WORK.

His hands were sure as they had been swift, and in that giant's grip Colonel Cannon seemed but a plaything.

Not the faintest suspicion of his presence had been entertained by the ranch-owner, up to the instant his deft left hand caught that weapon lying in the shadow of the little table, in such manner that its hammer could not fall upon the cartridge. And at the same time his powerful right arm crooked around Cannon's neck, drawing his head back with resistless force, the broad palm covering his mouth and nostrils.

All this as swiftly as the picture shifts in a magic lantern. All this without noise enough to alarm even the most suspicious ear, had such been in waiting just without that room.

At a nod from the Black Jaguar, Pablo Acosta placed the confiscated pistol on the table, then removed hand from lips, to call a different gag into play. And with point of knife tickling the throat of the helpless ranch-owner, he calmly looked to his mistress for further instructions.

"Why do you come here, Pablo Acosta?" she asked, coldly.

"To protect my queen."

"And if you had found her in real peril?"

"I would have removed it, as I stand ready to remove this dog of all dogs. Shall the good steel go home, my queen?"

"Wait yet a little," her glittering eyes fixed upon the face of her enemy, trying to estimate the torture he must be enduring. "How long have you been within sight and hearing, good Pablo?"

"Since before my queen darkened the window and lighted the room."

"You caught my signal, then?"

"As I would even if dead and in the grave."

"Then you were watching when this dog of all dogs dared shame the twin sister of sainted Seraphin Quesado by his touch?"

"My eyes saw all, and they burned to see still more, my queen."

"What do you mean by more, Pablo Acosta?"

"To see the sign that would unchain my hands, the signal that would let me leap at the foul cur's throat."

The Black Jaguar laughed softly as she rose a little in her seat, so that her face became plainly visible to Cannon's eyes as he lay helpless in that garroting grip.

"Do you comprehend, poor fool? Do you begin to realize how vain it is for such as you to even begin to think of matching your puny powers against my will? Even when you fancied you held me at your mercy, death was waiting my bidding! Death hung over your head, and I could have let it fall by a simple look, a wink, a trembling of an eyelash!"

"Did I make that sign, Pablo Acosta?" she added, turning her gaze upon the cold, grim face of the Mexican colossus instead.

"You made no sign, though I prayed for it to hasten, my queen!"

"And you dared not strike without my permission, of course," her tone and manner both changing as she sunk back in her seat. "You can leave us now, Pablo."

For once the well-trained nenchman seemed caught off his guard, and instead of his former swift obedience, he retained his grip on the Texan, his black eyes opening widely, almost stupidly.

"Must I repeat my words, Acosta?"

His grip slackened, but his moving fingers hovered over the pistol resting on the table, as though the very least he could do would be to disarm that cornered enemy.

Carlita Quesado made a swift, imperious sign, and Pablo Acosta fell back, leaving Creed Cannon in his seat, and that loaded weapon within easy reach of his hands.

"I asked not your aid then, good Pablo, though this poor fool fancied he held me entirely at his mercy. If not then, surely not now! Go back to your duty, Pablo, and come not again until you hear the Black Jaguar cry aloud!"

Bowing low the Mexican silently left the room.

"Are your eyes beginning to open, Creed Cannon?" sneeringly asked Carlita Quesado, leaning her folded arms lightly upon the table, gazing intently into the eyes of the man whom she had sworn to torment before utterly ruining. "Have I given you proof enough that I come here, guarded at every point? If not, would I leave this dangerous little invention lying so near your murderous hands?" laughing softly as the Texan made an involuntary motion toward the loaded revolver.

But his hand shrunk back as she uttered those words. It might, and probably would, have shot forward in savage haste to secure the weapon, had she showed any signs of forestalling him. But she made no sign to that effect. She seemed even anxious for him to arm himself. Why?

"Are you all devil?" the old man panted, hoarsely.

"I am what your evil deeds have made me, Creed Cannon! Until your murderous hand—Bah!" with a short, disagreeable laugh as she changed her position, leaning back in her seat, seemingly forgetful that by so acting she rendered it an easy matter for him to snatch up that pistol and fire at least one shot before her hands could fly forth to strike or parry. "I was speaking of Pablo Acosta, not of Seraphin Quesado; of the present, not of the dead and vanished past."

"And yet, do you know, colonel, Pablo dwells in the past, almost as entirely as does she whom he calls his queen. He is a good fellow, my big tiger! He is of noble blood, and bears a title when on the other side of the big river, though he drops it when he comes to Texas. 'Tis only they who have won a title like mine, that retain their honors in this land of heretics, you know!"

"What more—if you mean to tell of my children—"

"You scorn to listen while I sing the praises of my big tiger, then! Good! I mean to say no more about him, but your distaste is my pleasure, and so—Listen, my whimpering spaniel!"

"Besides a twin sister, Seraphin Quesado had a brother; not by the same father and mother, but still, a brother in love. For, when our parents both died, 'twas Pablo's mother to whom we ran when childish pain or childish troubles afflicted us. And so—Pablo became our foster-brother."

"He loved us, as only such a true-heart can love. When asked which one was nearest his heart, Seraphin or Carlita, he would ever answer both! To him we were only one being, one tree with two branches; and when one branch was lopped off, just when at its best and brightest, Pablo gave to the one remaining all the love which had been given the twain. And yet—what matter? I am telling of Pablo now, not of Pablo then!"

"He hates you above all living creatures, and would gladly accept eternal perdition for the privilege of killing the one who sent Seraphin Quesado to a degrading doom. But—he is my slave! I permitted you to lay violent hands upon my person, simply to show you how blindly, how faithfully the Black Jaguar is served by her cubs. And, barring the adoration, I have two score just such trusty slaves as Pablo Acosta!"

"What is all this to me? If you have nothing of greater importance to say, why not finish your evil work?"

"By slaying you?" laughed Carlita Quesado, softly.

"For what else have you come here?"

"To lay bare the past over which you have spent so many weary hours in vain lamentation, dear sir!" purringly uttered the Black Jaguar. "To show you how a lie can seem the truth. To prove false the old adage that the grave never gives up its dead!"

"If my children are really alive—"

With another of her incredibly swift movements, Carlita Quesado leaned forward, smiting his lips with the fingers of one hand, while the other, at the same time, swept that revolver from the table and under her *manga* as she drew back.

"Silence, dog! Have I not sworn that your children do live? Then, when you repeat that doubt, which you have done far too often, you insult the lips that gave you that assurance."

"Prove the truth of your words, and I'll bless those lips!" muttered Cannon, hardly knowing what he said or what he did, so completely had that vicious enemy shaken his nerve and bewildered his wits.

The Black Jaguar laughed mockingly.

"How long since was it that you refused to listen, Creed Cannon? But—be it so! I am not wholly ashamed of the past. Possibly other women have wrought out a more perfect revenge, but it might have been worse!"

"Never mind why I did not strike sooner. It is not part of my plan to show you how deeply my heart was wounded, nor how long it was after the grave covered over my dead, that I began to plot and plan and make ready for dealing the first blow called for by the vendetta I had sworn over the corpse of my twin brother. 'Tis with you and yours I meant to deal, Creed Cannon!"

"It was easy enough to find you, when the right time came round. Your name and fame had spread throughout all Texas, and had even crossed the big river, into my country. Why not? Had you not brought the notorious Seraphin Quesado to the gallows?"

"He deserved his fate!" muttered Colonel Cannon.

"Blasted be the lips that dare lie so foully!" flashed the Black Jaguar, her eyes ablaze; but only for a single breath. "But let it stand for the present. Time is passing, and the end comes nearer with each breath you draw, be that true or false!"

"Yes, it was an easy matter to find where you lived, and all about your family. For you had a family then! A proud and haughty wife, two lively boys, one cooing girl baby!"

Colonel Cannon tried to choke back a groan of mental agony, but enough escaped to bring a devilish joy to those glittering eyes, a low laugh of vicious triumph to those still full red lips.

"Have you not forgotten in all these long years, poor fellow? Can you still picture your happy home as it was before the twin sister to Seraphin Quesado struck her first blow for vengeance?"

"You merciless fiend!" gasped the tortured man. "Give over, or I'll tear that foul tongue from out your throat!"

"Lift but a hand before I grant you leave, Creed Cannon, and death will claim the last of your race!" sternly uttered his implacable enemy, then continuing without giving him a chance to retort: "As I said, 'twas an easy matter to find you and yours, but not so easy to deal a blow, and at the same time make escape certain. And it was this very difficulty that rendered my first stroke only a partial success."

"You lived too far from the safe side of the big river for delay after once making the raid. We had to swoop, strike, retreat, all in a single breath, I might almost say. And so—only part of my work was done, that night!"

"Was it not enough, you devil?" groaned Cannon.

"It might have been worse, yet 'twas only part of my plan. You were absent, your wife had taken her second son from home, whither I know not. Enough that we found only your oldest child, a boy, your youngest, a girl, but little more than an infant. And then, leaving the red cock to crow right merrily from your roof-tree, we rode back to our den with the rare prizes I had won!"

"To foully butcher them! To send—Oh, you pitiless demon!"

For a brief space Carlita Quesado watched her victim, gloating over his nearly breathless agony. This was the hour for which she had waited so long and so patiently! This was the beginning of the bitter vengeance which she

had vowed above the corpse of her brother! And she found it very, very sweet!

"To send—what, Creed Cannon?" she asked, at length. "A coffin, full of bones, together with the garments your children had worn on the night of their abduction, yes! But for what purpose? Why go to so much trouble? Why run so great a risk as conveying that coffin to your threshold entailed?"

"To wring our hearts by the sight of—God! If I might only kill you! If I might only torture you as you have tortured me and mine!"

The Black Jaguar laughed grimly at his impotent rage and torment.

"Partly for that reason, I admit, colonel, but not that alone. I calculated on that gift proving death, as well as its representation, for those children died of small-pox!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FEARFUL ALTERNATIVE.

WITH a gasp of horror Colonel Cannon recoiled from that woman—surely crazed when she performed such a hideous act, if not actually insane at the present moment.

"Do you begin to see through the mystery at last, dog of all dogs?" the Black Jaguar asked, her voice low but quivering with grim exultation. "Do you comprehend at length how utterly I hated you and yours? How I gloated over that precious package before sending it to its destination? How joyously I waited for the tidings of how the scarlet scourge placed your dearest under its fatal ban?"

"Thanks be to Heaven, you were foiled in that, at least!"

"I admit it," and with the words her unholy exultation seemed to pass away, leaving a dark and forbidding shadow upon her face. "I felt sure your dainty wife would catch the disease, possibly to die, mayhap to recover, but a hideous wreck and ruin, to disgust her loving husband with her scars and—But it failed!"

"And yet, I am not sorry. The blow did not fall so lightly, after all! Neither she, nor her boy, nor you—I prayed to all the saints that you at least might escape the scourge, for I wished you to live on for still greater things! But, as I said, the smallpox left all unharmed. The gruesome relics were wept and prayed over, then consigned to the earth. A grand stone was carved in their honor—I have seen it with my own mocking eyes! In honor of—not the children whose names it records, but a couple of nameless, fatherless brats, picked up out of the gutter where their last breaths were drawn, unheeded, unwept for!"

"Still, as I said, my trouble was not entirely lost. From that day your wife began to fade, for without hope to sustain her, how could she live? She did not, for long. And when she went to her grave, my heart gave me warning, though I was many a long league away at the time!"

"You killed her! You murdered my poor darling, just as surely as though you had sent a knife to her sad heart!"

"Or as surely as you murdered my twin brother by—Quiet!" her voice giving a warning hiss, as the tortured man seemed about to leap at her throat. "Harm me, and your still living children must pay the full penalty!"

It was pitiful, his complete subjection to that evil being! He, so proud, so manly, so honored and honorable in all else! And yet, what could he do, while that awful threat was held over his head?

If he had known for certain that she was lying; if he knew beyond all doubt that his children were dead, as he had so long believed; he would long ere this have killed her, let the consequence to himself be what it might.

But doubt he must, even while protesting to the contrary. Doubt he ever would, after this, until the whole truth was laid bare.

"Yes, she died, I killed her," said the Black Jaguar after another brief pause, as though wishing for him to rally again, at least sufficiently to realize the full force of each pang as her merciless tongue kept probing that still rank wound. "I hoped she would live through the smallpox, to disgust you with her hideous scars. But she was proof against the disease, only to sink and fade and die with a broken heart! Yes, I killed her. And I glory in knowing as much!"

"Are you all devil? Have you no mercy?"

"I am just what you made me, Colonel Cannon! But bridle your tongue, if you are wise. Time is passing, and there is still much work for my hands to accomplish before the moon rises. Then, too, I have not yet explained just why I preserved the lives of the young spawn, while trying so hard to destroy that from which they sprung."

"While you were mourning over them as dead, your children, boy and girl, were being reared with close attention. For what, do you ask? Right gladly will I tell you all, noble sir."

"My first care was to rob their minds of the past. Easy enough so far as the girl-baby was concerned, but not so easy while dealing with your son. He was already a tall, stout, headstrong little fellow, and he used to kick and bite and even swear when I told him his memory of

you, colonel, and your proud wife were but idle dreams.

"It took time and patience, but I begrudged neither. Why should I, when all I did was leading to the one grand finale: my sworn vendetta?"

Colonel Cannon groaned, his head drooping on his breast. But he spoke not, and once more his pitiless enemy resumed:

"At length I conquered even your brave lad, Creed Cannon, and as his past grew like a vague dream to his active brain, I put another into its place. I made him—as I had long since caused his sister to think—believe that he was the son of your victim, of Seraphin Quesado—no less!"

"Mercy—for them, not me!" moaned the miserable victim.

"Go on! say more!" mocked the Black Jaguar, rubbing her hands together in vicious glee. "I forbade you to speak, but I take off the seal. Go on—empty your overflowing heart before me, and I will—"

She stopped short, clicking her still perfect teeth together viciously as she realized her mistake. Colonel Cannon lifted his head, gazing defiantly into her dark face, his strength returning as if by magic. And as he spoke, his voice was steady, if low and husky:

"You have cured me of that weakness, Carlita Quesado. Tell your story, since you insist on so doing, but beware! Prove beyond all doubt that your life is guarded by those of my children—living, mind you! Fail, and I will tear you limb from limb!"

"You might try, but that is the extent of your power, dog of all dogs," coolly retorted the strange woman, leaning carelessly back in her seat once more. "I have but to lift a finger, move an eyelid, even, to foil all you can attempt in your desperation."

Almost involuntarily Colonel Cannon cast a glance behind himself, but he could see nothing of that giant figure; if within hearing, Pablo Acosta was cunningly hidden from view, just then.

"You are looking for my slave, but you see him not?" laughed the Black Jaguar softly, her eyes bright as points of fire. "He would be at your side in a twinkling, did I require his assistance. I don't. You could not touch me with so much as a finger-tip, were you to strain every muscle in your body to its breaking point! Do you doubt? If so, make the attempt, and be convinced!"

"I may, but not just now," coldly retorted the ranch-owner. "You have still more to reveal. Proceed, if you mean to finish before interruption comes from others."

"Meaning your son, Eugene?" with a sneer. "He may come, but hardly in condition to do even a poor, weak woman harm! Shall I tell you why?"

Colonel Cannon made no reply, his jaws firmly fixed, his deep-set eyes never wavering in their gaze. And when she noted this silent determination, the Black Jaguar once more took up her oft-broken thread:

"When I had blotted out all memory of the past, I covered it over with a veil of mingled lies and truth. I told them how Seraphin Quesado died, and who it was brought about his death. I told them he was their father, and solemnly swore them to never-dying vengeance on his vile assassin! Oh, it was glorious work for me, as you may believe! And you can be sure I left no visible flaws in that work of vengeful love!"

"With each passing year I added to their hatred for—their lawful father! With each year I taught them to regard him as an enemy, the torturing removal of whom would insure them eternal bliss! And now, for years back, it has been hard work to hold them in check, to make them wait until I said the hour of vengeance was fully ripe!"

Again she paused, as if for an outburst. Again was she disappointed in her hopes, for never a word passed those grimly sealed lips.

"I alone possess the power to lift that curse from their lives and from yours, Colonel Cannon, and now I ask you: are you willing to make it worth my while to do so? Speak, I command you!"

"You have hinted at something like this before. What do you mean?"

At that question, sounding artificial in its forced calmness, a sudden change seemed to come over the Black Jaguar. Her face grew less stern, her glittering eyes softened, her voice seemed almost that of another person as she spoke in response:

"I am beginning to grow old, Colonel Cannon. I am not altogether evil, though I have striven hard to make you think so, this evening. I had a heart, once, and I may yet find it again, if you will aid me."

"Once for all, what do you mean?" coldly demanded the veteran.

"That in teaching your children to hate, I have learned to love—bah!" with a short, hard laugh, flinging out one hand as though casting aside such unwonted weaknesses. "You are rich, I am poor. Give me fifty thousand dollars in cash, and I agree to wipe out the past!"

"Are you crazy, woman?"

"Wait. I know you have not so much money

on hand, but I know, too, you can easily raise that much on Hand-cuff Ranch. Do this, or you will never see your children again in this world!"

"Do you expect me to swallow such an artificial bait?" almost sneeringly asked the veteran. "Such a devil as you have proved yourself, never repents, unless at the very last gasp. And now I know you have lied! Now I know my poor children are in their grave!"

"I fully expected you would try to blind yourself by such means, money-lover," coolly retorted the Black Jaguar. "And so expecting, I have taken care to have my proofs perfect enough to satisfy the whole world, as well as yourself. I swear to prove the identity of your living children, the very minute you pay me the sum I demand for that information."

"How can I trust you so far?" hesitated the ranch-owner, his enforced calmness beginning to desert him once more.

"Mainly because you cannot well do differently," laughed the woman, softly, her eyes winning back their former glitter of triumph. "While I swear that both your son and your daughter are alive and well at this very hour, I alone can prove this! And where they are, or under what name they now pass, I swear that you shall never know if you fail to promptly accept the offer I have just made you!"

"You are trying to form another snare, or your eyes tell lies!"

"Never you mind my eyes, Creed Cannon. All you have to do is to give me your final answer. If you accept, well and good. If you are so insane as to refuse—"

"As I certainly do, unless you can produce perfectly satisfactory proof of your wild assertion, before the money is paid you."

"If you refuse, listen to the penalty," coldly persisted the Black Jaguar. "Your children have been brought up as being of no kin, despite what I told you a bit ago. Never mind now why I deceived you on that point. I am speaking the plain truth just at present."

"Until little more than one year ago, I kept your children apart from each other, and neither suspects the tie of blood which really unites them. Your daughter is lovely as an angel with her mother's blue eyes and golden locks. If anything, she is more nearly a perfect beauty than was your lady wife when you first kissed her!"

Colonel Cannon shivered, but said nothing. Black Jaguar hesitated for a brief space, then rapidly added:

"The boy takes more after his father, though stronger, heavier, more of an athlete. His hair and eyes—like yours were, long ago!—are black as polished jet. He is just such a man as would naturally capture the heart of—say, a girl like his sister! And—do you know, dear colonel! More than once, of late, I have fancied I could detect the light of love beginning to sparkle in hers, as well as in his eyes!"

"You infamous devil!" hoarsely panted the ranch-owner.

"Do you begin to see, at last, mole-eyed dog? Do you begin to guess what all these long years have been spent in planning? But it rests with you whether or no I carry out my last, heaviest blow! If you pay me the sum I demand—enough to carry me with comfort to my grave—I will restore your children, as pure and sweet as now. If you refuse, I swear to never give over until brother and sister are man and wife!"

That proved to be the final feather, and driven to insane fury, Colonel Cannon leaped to his feet, his hands shooting forth to grip that dark throat—to destroy his hated enemy forever!

But the Black Jaguar lifted one hand, and at its gesture, the ranch-owner reeled back with hands flying to his own eyes, shrieking madly!

CHAPTER XIX.

A HOST IN HIMSELF.

THE first intimation Maverick Mark had of impending trouble, was when that heavy body fell squarely on his back as he crept silently along toward the slender tree-trunk to which Eugene Cannon had been bound by order of Don Melchior Gayferos.

The shock was a severe one, but fortunately came in such a manner that his spine was not injured, nor his limbs greatly hampered. As for his mental faculties, death alone could paralyze them.

With a shrill yell of triumph, he who had discovered the crawling spy, sought to maintain the advantage he had taken care to win at the outset, but, throwing all his great strength and activity into the one supreme effort, Maverick Mark rose to his feet, hands bent far enough back to grip a shaggy head, his shoulders suddenly rounding, his back arching, every trained muscle acting in perfect unison.

It was yield, or suffer a broken neck, and the Rustler's heels flew up, his body followed, his limbs wildly gyrating as the whole made a double revolution through the air, to fall squarely into the fire, sending up a shower of sparks and hot ashes, bringing yells of wild dismay from the bearded cooks and their mates.

The instant he felt that dangerous burden leave him, Maverick Mark made the best of an

awkward situation, bursting into a cheer which doubly discounted the yell of the Rustler, jerking forth a revolver and sending bullet after bullet into camp, springing toward the captive Texan with knife flashing in his left hand.

"Close in, boys!" he yelled, most heartily, doing his level best to keep that confusion near the top notch. "Quarter to all who beg, but sure death to those who try to fight! Down 'em! Whooray for Texas!"

The wicked zip of a bullet as it fanned his temple and cut twin holes through his hat, called Maverick Mark's attention toward Don Melchoir, and only for Lota Quesado, who likewise sprung to her feet in wild surprise, her golden head covering his line of sight just as the sweetest of snap-shots was about speaking, Maverick would have called a life for a hat.

The swiftest of tip-ups saved the girl, though it wasted the lead, and there was no time left in which to do better.

"Cover, pard!" the Texan inserted between his wild yells, cheers, and orders to an imaginary force, at the same time sweeping his knife over the lasso-turns by which Eugene was held fast to the tree. "Jump up and back—yell and cavort—got to!"

"Rally! 'tis only one devil!" fairly howled Don Melchoir, as he recognized the wild Texan by the fire-glow, now flashing up again as the scorching Rustler rolled from out his hot bed.

But Maverick Mark was making noise enough for a score ordinary men, with his cheers, his orders, and, above all, his rapid shooting. From the very first the Rustlers were seized by a panic, and hardly waiting to fire a shot, they broke away for their horses, which were hitched close at hand.

Gayferos himself had sprung in that direction at the first alarm, pausing only to fire a single snap-shot at that leaping figure. He, too, fancied a strong force had taken them by surprise, but then he began to realize the truth, and while trying to rally his men, wheeled to give Maverick Mark another and surer shot.

Unfortunately for himself, he stood in the clear light, and the Texan proved quickest on trigger, yelling recklessly as he saw the head Rustler stagger back and fall in a limp heap, like one shot through the brain.

Although less than a score seconds had elapsed since his first shot was fired, Maverick Mark had set Eugene Cannon free, had dropped Don Melchoir, and at least one other. He was using his second revolver, now, and knew that the end must come right speedily.

"I can't—legs asleep!" cried the young ranchero, as he stumbled against his friend, saved only from falling by that swift left arm.

Maverick Mark picked Eugene up, carrying him with as much ease as a nurse might her infant charge, rushing across the open toward the horses, several of which were as yet unclaimed. And tossing Cannon on the back of one, he cut the rope and sent him off through the bushes.

"Run for it—I'm coming!" were his only words, for he saw that the Rustlers were beginning to recover from their panic.

That was a matter of course, since no enemy barred their way, and only one man had shown himself.

Maverick Mark sprung backward, just in time to avoid a slashing sweep of a machete in the hand of a giant Rustler, who reeled away with a bullet stinging his lungs. And then—with a shrill neigh, gallant Yellow Boy came plunging through the undergrowth in response to his master's signal!

"See you later, my jolly Greasers!" yelled the reckless Texan, as he leaped to saddle and sped away in chase of his rescued friend. "If anybody asks you who kicked up the bobbery, tell 'em Maverick Mark, the Man from Nowhere!"

That was a bit of bravado which might very well have been omitted, but the best of men have their weak points, and this was one of his.

As it was, he came perilously near paying a heavy price for the indulgence, too, since his voice served as a guide to the rallying enemy, and powder-winged lead came spitting viciously through the bushes, one breaking the skin as it cut through between arm and ribs.

Half a dozen leaps carried Yellow Boy clear of the timber island, and Maverick Mark gave a yell of delight as he instantly sighted his friend, less than a score lengths in advance, seemingly unharmed by that hail-storm of bullets.

"Right ahead, pardner!" he cried, cheerily, yet fully as much for the benefit of their enemies as for Eugene. "The dance is over, and now it's promenade all for home!"

"I thank you, Mark!" huskily cried Eugene, as Yellow Boy forged up alongside. "Only you could have done it so bravely!"

"Oh, hush!" quavered the wild Texan, turning in his saddle for a backward glance. "Good enough!" as he caught the rallying cries of the Rustlers, laughing anew as a couple of flashes showed the line of bushes back of the marksmen.

"They're coming, Maverick!" put in Cannon, hastily, as he made the same discovery. "I haven't even a baby gun to help you stand 'em off!"

"That's all right, pardner," the Man from Nowhere responded, his nimble fingers casting out empty shells and replacing them with fresh cartridges, then handing Eugene one of the heavy revolvers. "We can shoot all around 'em in the dark, you know. I wouldn't ask any easier contract than to make 'em dance to my music from now until their shoes dropped off, for that matter! But I'm not all hog; you can have a bit of the fun, if you don't take too much!"

"Fight if we must, but—I'm mighty anxious about home, Mark!"

"And the young lady? They didn't rope her in, too?"

"Not with me. I left her with father. But—I'm terribly uneasy, for all that, and if we can—"

"Give 'em the slip?" broke in Maverick, jumping at his meaning.

"They're coming, hot-foot! Can we do it, without a running fight?"

"Just as easy! Watch, and take notes, pardner," laughed the Texan, sending several shots, at brief intervals, back at the dimly visible Rustlers, now drawing clear of the timber, seemingly bent on avenging their temporary defeat by a single man.

"Now touch up your nag, Cannon. He ought to be a good one, or they wouldn't have picked him to serve on a raid so far inland. Straight ahead, until I turn, then you follow suit."

Maverick Mark sent several more bullets humming back through the comparative gloom, the bright flashes plainly betraying their course to those unfriendly eyes behind. Both horses were racing at speed, and so continued until they passed over one of the low swells in the prairie. Then, with a low cry of warning, Maverick Mark wheeled sharply to the right, riding thus for a dozen rods, then slackening his speed until the horses were doing little better than a walk.

"They're coming—hear 'em thump!" muttered Eugene, by no means as cool and contented as his companion appeared to be.

"Just now, but they'll be going in a little while longer," chuckled Maverick Mark, turning half around in his saddle, resting a hand on the thigh that crossed the pigskin. "I've laid the line for 'em to follow, and they're just idiotic enough to think 'twill last until they fix the finish to suit their own bloody taste! Instead—What say? Shall we take 'em on the flank, and clean 'em out for good and all?"

"You surely can't mean it, Mark?"

"I surey do! Lively! they're coming up the slope!"

"The odds are too heavy, and then—"

"The pretty yellow-hair may be among 'em?" laughed Maverick, meaningly. "Don't flinch, if I have pricked you, pardner! She's a daisy, if ever—What did I tell you?"

Phantom-like, yet far easier seen than they would be, thanks to the difference in elevation, the Rustlers dashed across the swell, riding at top-speed, cursing and snarling, resembling a pack of hungry wolves on a blood-marked trail. And then they faded out of sight once more.

"That throws them out!" coolly said Mark.

"They'll never stop to look for a trail until it's too late. And long before daylight comes to help them, they'll be many a long mile from here, wearing out good horse-flesh to save mighty bad man-meat!"

"You really think they'll break for Mexico?"

"Why not? They're not strong enough to whip all Texas, are they?"

"I wish I could feel sure they're no stronger than we've seen," muttered Cannon, uneasily, touching up his horse a bit. "They didn't let so mighty much drop where my ears could catch it, but, somehow, I believe they came here for revenge, rather than plunder!"

"How did they manage to rope you in, pardner?" asked Mark, as their horses broke into a canter.

"That's just how; roped me from cover, as I was riding back home."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I took Eloise home, and then picked up what boys were at the ranch, to do what we could to help out Zimmerman. I sent the men on to help round up the stampeded stock, and started to let the old man know just how the disturbance broke out. I met a squad of his boys, so turned back, knowing that father was alone with Eloise. He's pretty badly crippled up with gout, you know, too!"

"And they roped you in? The same gang that had you when you met up with the girl and the Greaser, of course. But—did they all keep together, or did part branch off for other work?"

"I'll never tell," with an uneasy frown. "The yank of that infernal rope knocked my senses galley-west, and when I woke up, I was tied to a saddle and making for the timber where you found me."

"None of the outfit was riding double, was they?"

"No. It looked as though they had a spare horse along for just such an occasion. And that's what makes me fear—Prick up, pard-

ner! I'll never breathe easily until I see for my own self that all's well at home!"

Maverick Mark turned in his saddle for a long, sweeping look in the direction of the now invisible timber island, as well as in the direction taken by the Rustlers. Nothing to cause uneasiness was visible, and not a sound came to show that the enemy had yet discovered the bold trick that had thrown them off the right scent.

"Prick up goes, pardner!" was his decision, letting Yellow Boy pass from canter to gallop, their long, swinging strides carrying them rapidly over the ground, yet without tiring either horse or rider. "We're too far off for even their sin sharpened ears to catch the thumping, though I'm almost sorry we let 'em off so lightly!"

"I saw one fellow take a tumble, just as you cut me loose!"

"I reckon," with a short, hard laugh. "The fool was so badly frightened that he ran right against my lead. For, honest, pardner, I wasn't shooting to kill. I didn't want to mad 'em too bad. Just scare their seventeen senses out of 'em, so to speak."

"They richly deserved all they got!"

"And heap sight more, unless I'm 'way off my center. I had to work in a hurry, of course, but I had time to think of one important fact."

CHAPTER XX.

THE YELP OF A COYOTE.

"I'll stick to it that not another man in all Texas could have turned the trick so neatly against such heavy odds! And—I can't find words fit to express my thanks, old fellow, but—"

"Then don't try, and don't interrupt when I'm drawing a moral," interposed Maverick Mark, with mock sternness. "I gave you an object lesson, back yonder, but if you miss memorizing the moral, I might just as well have saved my powder."

"I'm listening; you've won the right to lecture," laughed Eugene, though with poorly hidden uneasiness of mind.

"And I'm just a little the most precise man for claiming all my rights that ever you met up with, pardner! And so—open your ears, and when heard, make a note on't for future use."

"I told you I didn't shoot to kill, but to scare. Why so? Simply because a dead mate makes a man red-hot mad, while one yelping with fear turns a scare into a blind panic. See the point?"

"And a sharp one it is, too!" exclaimed Eugene, admiringly. "You must have seen a good many such rackets, Mark, to think so swiftly and act the same. Haven't you, now?"

"Far more than I trust will ever fall to your lot in life, Cannon," was the serious response. "Some I've hunted up for a purpose. Others I've had to take in, like this one, to help a good man out of a bad box. But by far the greater number have been forced upon me, where I had to fight or do worse. And so—let that point drop, please."

"If you say so, of course. And yet," hesitatingly, stealing a look into that dimly-visible face by the light of the moon. "You'll not be vexed, Maverick?"

"Hardly—with you."

"I wish I knew more about you, old fellow!"

"Just what, pray?"

"Well, everything, not to be too mighty modest," with a short laugh, as though to carry off even the suspicion of rudeness. "I know you're a good man—as good as they make 'em, nowadays, in fact! But that is about all. I can't say that I really know you. I can't say that I know who or what you are, or even—"

"Then you know just as much as I do," was the grave interruption. "I'm truly a maverick, Cannon. I never knew a parent. If a drop of my blood flows through other veins than those I carry about with me each day, I don't know it. If I had a birthplace, it may have been up in yonder moon, for all I can swear to the contrary."

"You honestly mean all that, Maverick?"

"I honestly do, Cannon. I am just what I say: a man from no place, a waif and a stray. And so I came to call myself what you know: Maverick Mark, the Man from Nowhere."

"You couldn't have picked out name or title better calculated to draw curiosity in your direction, though. Did you think of that?"

"I'm not so sure," slowly. "You know how common it is for men to adopt or be given odd handles, on the range. I had to have some name to sail under, and I reckoned I'd better select one that no other man could lay claim to. So—give me your hand, pardner!"

Almost involuntarily Eugene Cannon obeyed, and for a few seconds they rode along side by side in silence. Then, with a start, the younger man drew back his hand, muttering:

"What are you trying to get at, Maverick?"

"I've already got at it," with a low laugh. "I told you of one sharp trick I played, back at the grove, pardner, new I'll let you into another. Your pulse has quieted down, and you're fit for talking sober earnest."

"I don't catch on."

"Well, you soon will. You were all upset by what you had gone through with, since being roped by those rascals. You were not fit to talk on serious matters, and so I led you astray, pretty much as we threw those Rustlers on another course than the most important one. But now—while we're riding toward your home, let's talk it all over, and try to get down to hardpan."

"You think there's real danger to—to my folks?"

"I'll not go quite so far as that, but I'm free to admit that this little racket surely does mean more than shows on the surface. For why? They're raiders, from over the Grande, that's clear. And yet, not a single move have they made this day that fays in with Rustler custom!"

"I know. I thought, myself, it looked mighty odd, when trouble broke out. But I had Eloise to think for, just then, and afterward I didn't take time to reason matters out. Tell me what you think about it, Maverick, please?"

"Well, that's not so mighty easy, after all," thoughtfully. "It's a puzzle pretty badly tangled up, though several points stand out too clearly for a mistake. For one thing, that stampede was all wrong! In no single feature did it at all resemble the ordinary work of ordinary Rustlers. First, it was set in motion near the middle of the day, just when a common stock-thief would be little short of crazy to begin his work. Second, the alarm—for I know now that it was a regular set affair: dry hides, rattling horns, heap yelling, and the like—was given on the wrong side of the herds, heading them north, instead of south. And that proves, plain as daylight, that the imps never hoped to carry them across the border!"

"For what else could it be started, then?"

"That's just what we want to find out, and to settle one ugly doubt, I'm riding faster than even Yellow Boy relishes, straight for Hand-cuff Ranch!"

"You think—there's danger for father?" falteringly asked the younger man, almost viciously lashing his horse with his long, cowboy reins. "It's not—not that devil's work?"

"I'm hoping not, but what I told you was truth: the Black Jaguar has actually broken loose, and unless my information is false, she's about due on this side of the big river—worse luck!"

Eugene Cannon asked no more, just then. His every energy was bent toward getting the greatest possible amount of speed out of his horse, without running too great risk of breaking it down entirely before their destination was reached.

He knew what bitter cause the race of Cannon had for both hating and fearing her who had won the unenviable title of Black Jaguar. He knew that, far into Texas though Hand-cuff Ranch lay, Carlita Quesado had on more than one occasion pressed even further from Mexico, where only lust for gain urged her on at the head of her merciless cubs.

If this fear should prove true! If all these strange events had been deliberately planned in advance, purely with the hope of drawing nearly all defenders away from the ranch homes! If, even now, that pitiless fiend in human guise should be doing her satanic work at his unprotected home!

"Even if the worst is to be feared, pardner, I reckon we'll be in good time to issue a protest," said Maverick Mark, at length, gazing ahead toward the quarter where he knew Hand-cuff Ranch stood. "Black Jaguar usually makes clean work of it, when she does strike, and there's no red light our way—good luck!"

"She wouldn't dare fire the buildings, to bring all the county on her heels!" gloomily muttered young Cannon.

"Don't you think it! She'd dare anything to harm those she hates, and you know the undying vendetta she has published broadcast against all of your name and kindred. And so—brace up! If she really is coming, as I have cause to think, we'll get there ahead of my lady!"

"How did you get wind of her intended raid?"

Maverick Mark readily gave the wished-for explanation, but the story was a long one, possibly made longer than there was any need of, to keep Eugene from brooding too heavily over the possible disaster awaiting his coming home. Boiled down, a very few words will give all that is essential in this connection.

A half-blood, whom he had befriended at one time, gave him the warning, thus betraying a friend who had confided the facts to him over a bottle of *mescal*. And knowing how important that information might prove, Maverick Mark hastened at once toward Hand-cuff Ranch, to place its owner on the alert.

By the time his account was ended, the riders had drawn quite near to Hand-cuff Ranch, and even Eugene felt far lighter-hearted, now that the end was almost within sight, without aught to prove his forebodings true. And he was peering eagerly forward, when a low yet penetrating cry gave him a start, drawing an involuntary cry from his lips.

"Only the yelp of a coyote, pardner!"

laughed Maverick Mark. "Mad because we disturbed its nap as we rode by its nest, I reckon!"

So any other might have reasoned, but, for all that, it was a fatal mistake he made! For, less than half a minute later, a blinding flash lit up the scene, revealing a number of dark shapes leaping upon them!

Eugene Cannon went down with his horse, while Maverick Mark fell limply along Yellow Boy's withers, his limbs dangling like those of a corpse, as the dun steed plunged madly forward into the thick of it!

CHAPTER XXI.

UNDER THE BLACK JAGUAR'S CLAWS.

ONE instant the mocking face of the Black Jaguar before him, his vengeful hands shooting out to close with a death-grip upon her foul throat. The next, reeling blindly back from before that up-flung hand, screaming in horrible agony, both hands flying back to his own eyes, in which that swift gesture seemed to have kindled the very fires of tophet!

"Blind—blind!" the ranch-owner gasped, nearly falling over the chair which his sudden leap had upset.

"I warned you, but—"

With a howl of crazy vengeance Colonel Cannon reached out his hands in the direction from whence that mocking voice issued, plunging forward in hopes of even yet balancing accounts with the one to whose pitiless hatred he owed such a fearful debt.

"Here I am, mole-eyed bat!" mocked Carlita, then stepping lightly aside as the blind rush came, thrusting out a spurred foot over which her victim tripped and fell headlong.

Even as she did this, her ears were ringing with a clear cry which came from without the room, and tossing back the bronze *manga* so as to leave both arms unimpeded, Carlita Quesado faced the door just as it was flung open by Eloise Thornton, pistol in hand.

"Uncle Creed, what is it? What's the— You vile creature!" recoiling just a trifle as she caught sight of the ranch-owner lying on the floor, partially stunned by his blind fall. "You've murdered him!"

With the words her pistol came up, and only her remarkable agility of body and quickness of wit saved the Black Jaguar from death. Even then the lead clipped her plume as she ducked and leaped quarteringly across the room.

"Kill her!" hoarsely panted Colonel Cannon, endeavoring to regain his feet, but with efforts as blundering and unsteady as those of a drunken man. "Blind—kill—"

"Peace, ye dainty cat!" snarled the Black Jaguar, giving another leap that carried her fairly inside the maiden's guard, tearing the *manga* from her own shoulders as she came, then flinging it over Eloise's head, giving it a dexterous twist that held the muffler in place, of itself, while her strong hands were disarming the girl.

An angry cry, partly smothered by that muffler, told the blinded soldier where to turn, and, forgetting himself in his fears for his ward, whose voice he had recognized, he would have either saved or avenged her, had his ability equaled his will.

Carlita Quesado gave vent to a wild, chilling cry, better befitting chaparral than close walls, at the same time jerking her fair captive away from the open door toward which Cannon was plunging with out-flung arms.

"Good, Pablo!" she cried, with a laugh of triumph, as her giant servant showed himself in the doorway just in time to receive that blind charge. "Clip his claws, but handle with care! He's worth a mint, if properly treated."

"If he's harmed you, my queen, I'll grind his bones to powder!" the giant fellow growled, almost squeezing the life from Cannon's body, as he twisted him from his feet and held him helpless.

"Harm him not, I say!" flashed the Black Jaguar, herself finding it a far more difficult task to subdue the maiden than she had calculated upon. "Bind him fast! Haste ye, Pablo! That shot may bring more upon our shoulders than we care to entertain, just now!"

As though that thought lent her double strength, Carlita Quesado lifted Eloise in her arms, and, despite her still violent struggles, bore her swiftly out of the room, through the passageway and to the front entrance. Once there, she lifted her shrill voice for the second time in rare imitation of the chaparral king, sweeping the space lying between the hacienda and its attendant cluster of buildings to the north.

She knew that the place was pretty nearly deserted, but even more time than she thought had been spent in torturing Creed Cannon, and she could not know how many changes might have taken place since she herself inspected the ground.

Like an echo of her own cry, others came from the leafy border along the near shore of the little lake, and a number of dark shapes came dashing swiftly toward the hacienda, in answer to her signal.

"Ready, queen!" cried the foremost, a tall,

sinewy fellow of middle age. "Where shall we strike first, and how hard?"

"Yonder!" with a nod of her head toward the ranch buildings. "You know what to do—do it! Sure work, but no slaying unless you are forced. Off with ye, men!"

"All of us, Black Jaguar?" asked the leader of the squad, a wave of his hand sending his men dashing away. "Must we leave you here alone?"

"Have I not Pablo Acosta?" with a short, sharp laugh. "Go, or even you may feel the Black Jaguar's claws, Mendez."

During that rapid interchange of words, Eloise Thornton had hung heavily, inertly, across Carlita's arm, like one utterly exhausted by the vain struggle she had maintained from the instant that dense-woven muffler had dropped about her head and shoulders.

But now, gathering all her energies, Eloise strove to break away from those evil arms, almost succeeding through her very swiftness. Almost, but not quite!

"Peace, ye squirming fool!" angrily snarled the human tigress, her powerful arms contracting until it seemed as though she meant to crush in the ribs of her captive. "I mean ye no harm, if you force me not that far. If ye do—Peace, I say!"

"Give her to my arms, queen!" cried Pablo Acosta, drawing near, the clear moonlight revealing a grim smile as it came into his swarthy face. "Mayhap she's better used to being embraced by one of my sex than of yours!"

"Where is Cannon? If ye have let him—"

"Lying in yonder, with claws clipped, even as my queen commanded," was the swift interposition.

"Alive?"

"Alive, since the Black Jaguar said it."

On the surface, nothing could have improved that response, but the Black Jaguar's ears were very keen, and so were her wits. She knew that Pablo Acosta hated Creed Cannon, only a little less than she hated him. She knew that the giant Mexican would gladly sacrifice his left hand, could he see its mate give death to the ranchero.

There was a poorly-hidden irritation underlying his words, which caused her to believe he had not permitted that hatred to fly squarely in the face of her stern commands, but—might he not have sought satisfaction by more round-about means?

"True, as ever, my noble Pablo!" she exclaimed, nothing of her suspicions showing in tone or manner. "We have waited so long for vengeance, 'tis hard to hold back the hungry teeth, now that the feast seems ready spread, but—we can wait, since still better food lies just ahead!"

"I can wait, since you command delay, my queen," bowed Acosta.

Was it the better to hide the fierce glitter of fiercer triumph in his eyes? Was it to blind her to— The mere suspicion caused her heart to leap, her blood to turn colder, but still the Black Jaguar was mistress of herself, even as she was queen to this reckless subject.

"Do you know what a treasure you have asked charge of, Pablo?" she said, with a short, hard laugh, at the same time thrusting Eloise upon him. "Hold her tenderly, yet securely! 'Tis part of his heart ye have within your arms, Pablo Acosta!"

"Not his—not another child?"

"Not of his own blood, but quite as precious in his eyes, Pablo. The fair one selected to help his younger son carry on the race. The very apple of his eye, as I have discovered since first facing our old enemy, good Pablo. So—guard her with care, I beseech thee!"

With a low laugh of exultation, Carlita Quesado left Pablo Acosta holding Eloise in his strong arms, and then she sprang swiftly back to the room where Colonel Cannon had suffered so intensely during the last few hours.

He was leaning back in his chair of antlers, just at that moment so still, so deathlike, that the Black Jaguar gave a low cry of savage fear, feeling her vague suspicions were more than well founded.

But only for an instant. As that hated voice came to his ears, Colonel Cannon shivered violently, giving one hopeless attempt to break away from his bonds, drops of intense agony trickling down from his sightless eyes.

"Devil! fiend from hell! Kill me outright!" he gasped, in tones that would have been inarticulate to ears less keen than those, sharpened as they were by undying hatred.

"What! you pray for death?" mocked the Black Jaguar, almost dancing with joy, as her fears proved false. "Rather would I believe my ears played me false! You? The proud, rich, honored, well-beloved Colonel Creed Cannon, begging for death as a starving wretch might beg for a dry crust? You, with a handsome, gallant son? You, with a beautiful maiden, ready to become your daughter in reality, as she is already a daughter in love?"

"Kill me—do with me as you will, but spare my poor little girl!" groaned the blinded ranchero, shivering afresh with agony, both of mind and of body.

"Of course I will spare her," laughed the

Black Jaguar, her hatred far too intense to grow weary of inflicting torture. "Did I not nearly suffocate her with my loving embrace just now? Have I not given her to the arms of good Pablo, bidding him watch over her as a pearl beyond all price? And—shall I tell you what a glorious future I have already mapped out for the dainty darling?"

"Devil!" once more fiercely striving to break loose. "Harm even a hair of her head, and I'll visit your accursed head with a million deaths!"

"Not leaving even one death as payment for your own life, my most noblesoldier?" sneered the Black Jaguar.

"Her first! Spare her, and do with me as you will. Harm her, and the whole world is too small to cover you from my vengeance!"

"And you can talk like this, while helpless as a blinded cur? Bah! even were you strong, free, armed, and with full use of your eyes, I would laugh at your threats! But now—surely, a live tigress, with all her faculties unimpaired, need have no fear of a blind dog?"

"Blind—I am blind!" moaned the sorely-afflicted veteran, agony keeping his haggard cheeks wet. "I'm not fit to live longer! Kill me, you fiend! Put an end to this fearful torture! But—spare my poor, innocent lady-bird! Surely, I am enough. She never harmed you, even in thought! You can have no grudge against her. Then—mercy for the child, if a spark of humanity be left in your accursed soul!"

Black Jaguar laughed anew at that characteristic conclusion. Truly, she was feasting high, now that her vendetta had grown ripe.

"You would save the dainty darling then, Creed Cannon? You would even part with some of your hoarded wealth, rather than have harm come to her? You would pay for her liberty?"

"Even to my last dollar, if I could trust to your word! But I know I can't! You'd promise, you'd swear on the holy cross, only to break every pledge the next moment!"

"You are right, Creed Cannon!" with undisguised ferocity. "Had you accepted my terms when first offered, it might have been different, but now—I've tasted of vengeance, and find it far too delicious to be given up, even for an ocean of gold! Not your entire wealth, doubled a thousandfold, can choke me off now!"

"Devil! You triumph now—you have rendered me worse than a corpse—but my boy will avenge us both!" gasped Cannon, writhing as much as those closely-fitting bonds would permit. "Eugene Cannon will hunt you down to death!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Black Jaguar. "Your son? Eugene Cannon? Even in your blindness you have not forgotten how to lie, Creed Cannon! For—your noble son is now a helpless captive in the hands of my men! As for the fate that awaits him, you can study that out while waiting for the glorious red cock to begin crowing on your roof-tree!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BLACK JAGUAR IN AMBUSH.

WITH echoing tread the Black Jaguar passed to the door, then stole back on tip-toe to gloat over the victim to her demoniac ingenuity.

It was a picture sad enough to move any but a heart of stone. His nerve broken, his strength drained away, his brain nearly crazed by all he had been forced to undergo, Colonel Cannon had never a doubt as to his utter blindness. And believing himself left alone, to suffer until the fire demon came to his relief, he gave full vent to his agony, no less of mind than of body.

A hot, vicious imprecation scorched the woman's lips at the too early coming of Pablo Acosta, but she sprung to the entrance to meet him, almost viciously demanding:

"Where is the girl, man? If you have—"

"She is in safe hands, my queen. I come to report that all is ready for finishing up, whenever you are so inclined."

"I heard no sound of fighting."

"There was none. Only a woman or two, with one fool of an old man, who dropped before he had time to make use of the gun he was idiot enough to draw against a score stout knaves!"

"His blood be on his own head! Come, good Pablo," gripping his arm and forcing him away, the old suspicions returning as he seemed inclined for another glance at the blinded ranchero. "In business like this, one is wise who looks after each little detail through one's own eyes. Come!"

It proved to be time wasted, so far as improving matters was concerned. The Rustlers had been thorough in doing the task assigned them, rendered easy enough by the stampede having drawn away every able-bodied employee, leaving but one man, and he an invalid, besides the few women servants, less than half a dozen, all told.

These had been bound and gagged, suffering no material injury at the hands of their captors. Not because they were saints, but thanks solely to the strict orders given them by their leader.

"All is well done, Pablo!" said the Black

Jaguar, with a nod of approval when that swift tour of inspection came to an end.

"Shall I give the men leave to begin gathering up the spoils, then, my queen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you will let them plunder, before burning?"

"Neither the one nor the other! Our work here is complete."

"But—are we to go back as we came, with empty hands?"

"You are to obey my orders, or pay the full penalty!" sternly said the woman, turning back toward the hacienda, leaving the big fellow to reluctantly follow at will.

If Pablo Acosta was taken aback by such unexpected orders, be sure the less thoroughly trained Rustlers gave vent to their disappointment even more pointedly, though each growling voice was stilled when the Black Jaguar came near, or glanced in that direction.

Carlita Quesado was not one to permit even the ghost of mutiny to stalk abroad without promptly laying it, and when she caught those ugly mutterings as her will became generally known, she drew a brace of revolvers and boldly confronted the disappointed Rustlers.

"Silence, ye dogs!" her voice rung out, sternly, her blazing eyes roving from face to face as though seeking a scapegoat for the rest. "Have ye followed me this far, only to turn upon your chief at last?"

"We're your slaves, Black Jaguar," sulkily spoke up one of the party, after waiting a little for some other to run the risk. "We've proved our fidelity as often as there arose an occasion. But now—surely the fire will never burn less freely if our poor hands carry away such trinkets as may stick to their finger-tips?"

"There shall be no plundering, even as there will be no fire," the Black Jaguar declared, toying with her dangerous weapons like one who sought only a fair excuse for using them, to kill. "Your reward awaits your home-coming, just as I promised you before crossing the Grande. I told you then that this was no ordinary raid, for plunder's sake. I repeat those words to you now."

"My ends have been gained, and now it only remains for you to guard my prizes back to our den. As for Hand-cuff Ranch, we leave that as we found it. Not a spark shall be kindled. Not a peso's worth shall be taken from these buildings. I say it; I, the Black Jaguar! And I swear by all the saints! I'll kill the knave who dares to break orders, even in thought, from this moment forward!"

"Pablo Acosta waits in readiness to serve, his queen as executioner," coldly declared the giant, stepping forward, weapons in hand.

The Rustlers fell back, silent if sulky. Not one among them dared invite certain death by raising another protest. The incipient mutiny was quelled even before it fairly sprung into life.

The rapid patter of footfalls, coming from the dim plain beyond the little lake, was welcomed by men as well as masters, breaking what was an awkward if not dangerous silence.

"What is it, Marco?" demanded the Black Jaguar, recognizing the fellow for one of the sentinels she had caused Pablo to throw out, as a surety against being taken by surprise.

"Horsemen—coming this way!" hastily reported the scout.

"How many? Who are they?"

"Not many—two or three, at the most. I sighted them afar, thanks to this," tapping the field-glass hung by his side. "I only paused to make certain they were headed this way, then ran to report."

"Enough! Go back, and lie in their path. You can creep and crawl like a snake—do it now!"

"And when they come, my queen?"

"If friends, give the old signal. If enemies, yelp like a coyote, and that sound will give us their line. Go, Marco! And you, Pablo!"

"Ready, my queen!"

"Take half the men, and ambush them, opposite me. If the coyote yelps, those riders must be killed or captured at any cost! You comprehend, Pablo?"

"They shall be captured. We can shoot their mounts, if it looks too risky to trust to the riatas. Or, shall we shoot the riders, instead?"

"Better cripple their horses, perhaps. Haste thee, man! Lead to ambush those I leave on my right hand!"

As she spoke, the Black Jaguar forced a passage through the gang, motioning such as were on her left to follow her lead, then running at a swift pace toward the shore of the lake.

She knew that the glass carried by Marco was a good one, and that the withered-up little rascal had eyes almost equal to those of an owl for night-work; but she had no means of knowing how far distant were the horsemen he had sighted, and time was precious.

It may as well be stated right here that the Black Jaguar had been drawing pretty freely on her imagination, or, rather, taking a good deal for granted, when swearing to Colonel Cannon that his son Eugene had been captured by her cubs.

At best, she could only hope as much. She had given her men orders to capture him, if at all possible, but she did not know that they had really been so fortunate as to do so.

And now, hearing of these horsemen heading direct for Hand-cuff Ranch, she more than half-believed one of the number must be young Cannon, which was the cause of her partly changing the first orders she gave Pablo Acosta.

That belief grew stronger with the passage of each moment, and by the time she had led her party to the best cover offering itself, in case the coming horsemen should stick to the main trail, as was to be expected, she was ready to give her men their final orders.

"Fire not a shot, lift not a hand, until I give the signal," she hastily muttered, peering across the plain in the direction from whence came that barely-audible patter of hoof-strokes. "If I utter the tiger cry, make sure of all, even if you have to fire at men as well as beasts. But if I only give the hiss, shoot horse and capture riders. You comprehend, my cubs?"

Hardly waiting for the affirmative mutter, Carlita Quesado glided across to where Pablo Acosta had ambushed his force, almost directly opposite the covert utilized by her squad, giving the same caution to her giant henchman.

"Something warns me 'tis the spaniel's pup!" she added, hastily. "You know him. Your eyes are keen and true. If he it should be, kill his mates, but spare his life for a far worse fate!"

"Rest easy, my queen. Your will is our law," bowed Pablo. "If the coyote yelps, we will perform our duty."

The Black Jaguar glided swiftly back to resume charge of her own force, bending low to the ground, for now she could distinguish at least two horsemen rapidly drawing nearer their fate.

And she had barely time to drop a final warning before the wild, lugubrious cry of the prairie-wolf announced the coming of enemies, not friends.

Without a thought of impending peril the two horsemen came trotting briskly along the trail, and then, recognizing Eugene Cannon, the Black Jaguar gave the sharp hiss that caused those fire-arms to explode.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT THE BLACK JAGUAR'S MERCY.

THE first volley was fired by the squad under Carlita Quesado, but that blinding flash, that stunning explosion, was duplicated by Pablo Acosta and his force across the trail, almost immediately after.

Failure seemed among the impossibilities, the distance was so short, the targets so large. With men born north of the Rio Grande, given similar orders, the job could not have been botched, but where one Mexican knows how to use his fire-arms, a hundred can only abuse them.

"Fire!" screamed the Black Jaguar, leaping out from cover as she saw Yellow Boy, not only on his feet, but plunging ahead as if wholly unhurt by that storm of lead. "Out, and drink his blood, my cubs!"

With more daring than wisdom, she tried to catch the charging animal by the head as it came plunging nearer, but the partial grip her fingers secured, only enabled Yellow Boy to hurl her further away, her body upsetting more than one of the Rustlers as they broke cover in eager haste to complete their bloody work.

Then, with its rider still lying limply along its withers, the dun horse broke through the disordered mass, fading away in the gloom despite the scattering shots sent after it.

"After him!" thundered Pablo Acosta, as soon as he could recover his balance, lost while making a vain clutch at that yellow creature as it broke away. "Take him, living or dead! 'Tis the queen's orders, and failure—"

"He must fall, quickly!" Juan Mendez was shouting at the same time. "Though he had the lives of a thousand cats, he must fall! I can swear my lead pierced his heart!"

"And mine!"

"I saw the moon shine through the mighty hole caused by my lead!" howled one sin-bent rascal, capping the climax.

And so it came about that the Black Jaguar was able to pick herself up and collect her scattered wits before such of the gang as actually started in chase of the flying horse, had passed out of hearing. And when she realized what was taking place, it was her vocal organs that sent the wild, piercing scream of the Mexican tiger floating through the night, recalling her unruly cubs.

"Must he escape us, my queen?" Pablo Acosta ventured, as that signal was given, but then involuntarily flinching from that fiercely-gesticulating arm.

"Why not, since ye let him play with ye all? Bah! why did I not bring three old women with me on this raid? Truly, they would have done better, cleaner work than—Dogs ye are, not cubs of the jaguar!"

Pablo Acosta made no defense. When Carlita Quesado was in one of her mad fits, silence alone could serve a wise man.

He might have offered a plausible reason for

that seemingly unaccountable failure, but he knew that the Black Jaguar would not listen to an excuse until her temper lulled a bit. And in attempting to excuse others, he might easily draw vengeance for all upon his own head.

Possibly his silent submission, bowing his head with hands crossed over his bosom, helped Carlita Quesado to realize her injustice, for she turned abruptly away from the giant, striding over to where the horse ridden by Eugene Cannon had never moved after plunging headlong to ground, fairly riddled with bullets.

She stooped over the form of the young ranchero, turning it over so that the rays of the moon fell athwart his face. A sweep of her hand partially removed dust and blood, enabling her keen eyes to fully recognize the youngest son of her hated enemy.

"Look, Pablo!" she hissed, her tones almost inarticulate with savage exultation. "See! 'tis the spaniel's whelp! 'Tis the last of the vile race against which we mutually vowed an undying vendetta! Oh, most glorious night, which brings all this to pass!"

Pablo Acosta may have entered fully into her demoniac delight at feeling the tide running so completely in her favor, but if so, he betrayed it after an entirely different fashion.

The Black Jaguar seemed fairly beside herself, now bending low over that blood-marked face, now springing to her feet with a fantastic war-dance—it could hardly be called aught more civilized!

Acosta bent his energies to learning as speedily as possible just how far the young ranchero had been injured by that surprise.

He could find no actual wounds, though bruises must be plenty, after such an ugly fall. Eugene Cannon had escaped the bullets, so many of which had joined in carrying death to his horse.

So far as his practiced hands could tell by that hasty search and examination, he had even come off without a broken bone!

"He will live, Pablo?" asked the Black Jaguar, as the giant drew back from that examination. "He is not dead?"

"He will live, my queen. He is not dead."

"If your men had performed their work one-half as surely!" Carlita snapped with a flash of her first vexed anger, giving the carcass a kick with her spurred boot. "See! 'tis full of holes as the sky is of stars!"

"And part of them from my side," quickly spoke the big fellow. "It is not so easy to keep a moving mark covered by night, and while we waited for your signal, there came instead your volley. You saw how this brute plunged aside, nearly upsetting its mate? And so—one horse caught both volleys! But—my lead hit a better mark, and when his spurs disentangle from the stirrups, 'twill be a corpse that strikes the plain!"

"No matter—I have here all the prize I lacked!" laughed the Black Jaguar, once more her usual self. "You are strong, Pablo: lift up the whelp and bear him over to the hacienda, yonder."

"To leave son, as well as father?" harshly demanded the Rustler, hesitating to obey that totally unexpected command.

"To leave yet another thorn to rankle in that father's heart!" was the swift response. "True, his eyes are blinded, yet surely he can recognize his whelp! Ay! see!" laughing viciously, as the young man gave a gasping breath, stirring faintly. "T'would be a burning shame to part forever father and son, without granting them time for a last farewell!"

"You forget our shots, my queen? Sound carries far on a night like this, and we are many a long league from our den. Is it wisdom—"

"Mayhap not, Pablo, but 'tis revenge," laughing again. "I will have my way, but it need not delay us long. Before the cubs are ready to begin their retreat, the dam will be there to lead them."

She turned aside to give Juan Mendez a hasty order to prepare their horses for the road, then followed after Pablo, who was nearing the ranch with his still senseless burden.

Colonel Cannon was as she had left him, still sightless, still helpless in his bonds. And once more the merciless torture began, though cut far shorter than she could have wished.

In mocking tones she recalled what Cannon had said about his son's avenging his wrongs and those which might be visited upon his ward. And then, when Eugene began to realize that he was still in the land of the living, he was brought face to face with the helpless veteran.

"Father—you devils!" the young man gasped, gathering his powers as far as possible, but held with ease by the giant's arms.

"My boy! you, too? Is there no mercy in heaven, then?" groaned the bound and blinded soldier.

"Was there mercy on earth when Seraphin Quesado was forced to the gallows?" fiercely cried the Black Jaguar. "Was there mercy in your foul heart when a woman begged on her knees for a reprieve? Just so much mercy shall there be for you, Creed Cannon! Even as you gave the body of Seraphin Quesado to me, his

twin, even so will I give back to you the corpse of this, your son!"

She waved a hand in token that Pablo should remove his vainly struggling captive. She paused barely long enough to hiss a few brief but bitter words into the ears of the blind ranch-owner, then hastened from the hacienda to where all else was in readiness for a start on their long homeward ride.

Eugene Cannon, now pretty well recovered from the heavy shock he had received when that cunning ambushade opened, was securely bound in a saddle, as was Eloise Thornton.

Pablo Acosta brought her horse, plainly feeling a late ease at so much time being wasted, though only indirectly hinting as much.

"There is nothing more to delay us, my queen? The night is passing, and though as yet no warning of coming danger has been sent in by our keen-eyed cubs, any moment may bring some of the accursed Tejanos back."

"There is naught further to keep us, Pablo," said the Black Jaguar, as she sprang lightly into the saddle, casting a keen glance over the men gathered near. "All of our cubs are here?"

"All save the out-lookers, my queen."

She lifted one hand to her lips, sending forth a marvelous imitation of her namesake's cry, sounding the signal that would send the spies skurrying in hot haste to their saddles. And then, detailing a guard to keep particular watch over Eugene Cannon, she drew alongside the mount assigned Eloise, and the retreat was fairly begun.

Once begun, it was pressed vigorously, and through hour after hour no halt was called, no pause was made. Mile upon mile was piled up behind them, and never an obstacle did they find in their path.

"'Tis a marvelous streak of good luck, Pablo!" the Black Jaguar laughingly exclaimed, at length. "Surely, all the saints are watching over us this glorious night!"

"It may be so, my queen," was the hesitating response, his gaze wandering on all sides, like one whom a guilty conscience denies rest. "I pray it may last, but—'tis almost too much to expect."

"Why so, croaker of evil?" mocked his mistress. "Bah! I'll hear no more of your forebodings! Lock thy lips, grouty Pablo! I'll none but joyous visions this darling night of good luck!"

On through the night, their pace limited only by the necessity of keeping their mounts from breaking down, and not until the gray light was beginning to pale the stars in the east did Carlita Quesado call a halt.

And even it was more for the purpose of issuing fresh orders to her men, than because their mounts were incapable of keeping up their rapid flight. They had one and all been carefully selected from thousands of their kind, with an eye to this very point.

"'Tis here we must begin to throw dust over our trail, Pablo," she said, swinging herself out of the saddle, in which she was promptly imitated by all of her command. "Of course we will be hunted for by the Texans, but if they catch us after this start, all who fall into their evil clutches richly deserve the fate they will surely receive!"

"Our queen has but to command, and we will obey."

"You will take charge of the spaniel's whelp, Pablo," seemingly careless whether or no the two luckless captives caught or comprehended her instructions. "Already you know the course you are to take, and if any one man can carry a party safely across the great river, that man is faithful Pablo Acosta!"

"You honor me above my deserts, oh, queen!" bowed the giant, with real or admirably-assumed humility and gratitude combined. "But, if Pablo Acosta fails in this the tidings will reach you from other lips than his."

"I know. You will be past speaking. But my star is still shining brightly, and I have perfect faith that all will continue well. But, Pablo, listen," her voice growing hard and even vicious: "Carry the whelp across the border alive, if you can, but if not—never abandon his carcass until you absolutely know the last spark of life has fled!"

"I will kill him with my own hand, my queen, if it comes to that."

"So be it! And I swear to do as much for this dainty Northern flower!" flashing a venomous glance into the pale yet resolute face of Eloise Thornton. "Now, Pablo, you know what to do. Break your trail, as agreed upon, and I will do the same. Join me at the old rendezvous, over the river. Now—the saints be with you, my good friend!"

"Mary Mother guard thee, oh, my queen!"

And so the party separated, the Black Jaguar riding away with Eloise under her care, followed by half a dozen picked men, Acosta taking the larger force, with Eugene Cannon, riding away at a sharp angle.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MAVERICK MARK MAKES A VOW.

THE Man from Nowhere caught a glimpse of that blinding flash in advance, but that was all

he saw of the ambushade. If a mountain had dropped out of the sky, to hit him squarely on the head, his senses could not have abandoned him more abruptly, more completely.

It was pure good luck that kept him from falling to the ground, or, rather, it was the involuntary shying of Yellow Boy in the very direction that bit of lead knocked his master, that let Maverick Mark fall along his withers, an arm dangling on each side, instead of his pitching headlong to the ground.

Pablo Acosta had given a pretty correct guess as to how one horse had escaped instant death. That ridden by Eugene Cannon chanced to be nearest the Black Jaguar, and naturally enough her squad concentrated their fire upon it. Though death-smitten, the poor animal leaped aside, forcing Yellow Boy back and out of the line of fire from Pablo Acosta's squad. His men quite naturally took the larger mark, and so their lead was wasted on an already dead horse.

But Pablo himself, being a better or a cooler marksman than the majority, aimed higher, and it was his lead that sent Maverick Mark from consciousness to mental oblivion.

It may seem incredible that the Texan should not have been cast out of the saddle, after all, but hardly beyond belief of one who knows what a true-born rider is. Even in death, the legs of such an one will almost require force to break their grip on the ribs of a horse.

Yellow Boy, bearing more than one skin-break to act as so many spurs, but without a serious wound for all that shooting, plunged madly through the crowd of Rustlers, then sped away through the moonlight, even so soon regaining his usual level, smooth gait.

Other bullets were sent hissing after him, and a number of the excited Rustlers set out in chase, afoot though they were; but before any one of their number had covered the space lying between the hacienda and the spot where Black Jaguar sprung her ambush, her wild cry called them back from their worse than vain quest.

If anything, Yellow Boy fled still more swiftly after that scream, possibly attributing his smarting cuts to the claws of the tiger, with a few of which he had already some experience. But then, as time passed on, and he felt his master swaying heavily in the saddle, so differently from his usual manner, the intelligent creature slackened its pace, giving a whimper of uneasiness. And then, like a log, or a sack of meal, Maverick Mark pitched headlong to the ground.

How long he lay thus, only the shifting stars could tell him. His first sensation was of a warm yet damp muzzle touching his face, his first sight the head of Yellow Boy, who was doing his best to rouse the master he loved so entirely.

That was no easy task, even when those scattered senses gradually came back enough so Maverick Mark could help. He felt as though his head weighed a full ton, and at the same time could almost have taken oath that he had no head left, at all!

"If 'tisn't a hornets' nest, what makes all this buzzing?" were his first words, his hands gripping each side of his head, now trying to hold it fast upon his shoulders, then tempted to hurl it far away, lest those loudly-singing hornets should sting him to death once again!

But, little by little, he began to rally, and Yellow Boy whimpered joyously as his master at length assumed a sitting posture. Even then Maverick Mark was in no condition to decide whether this strangely-bewildered being was himself, or a complete stranger. And many a long minute passed by before he began to recall what had actually taken place.

When that point was safely passed, however, the rest came more rapidly. He knew that Eugene and himself must have run blindly into an ambushade, just when their spirits were rising highest with their first glimpse of Hand-cuff Ranch, looming up unharmed, with never a thing to warn them of trouble ahead. He felt the wet track where the bullet of Pablo Acosta had plowed through his scalp, and laughed grimly at the smarting pain caused by that examination.

"No bones broken, and the hornets are losing their voices! Brace up, old man! There's nasty devilry abrew, and plenty of hot work for your doing, or all signs fail!"

He rose to his feet, and had to cling to Yellow Boy, to keep from falling again as a sickening darkness flashed across his sight. If he had eaten his regular meals, that day, all would have been wasted, but as it was, he rallied far more rapidly than under contrary conditions.

As his sight began to clear, his hands sought his belt of arms, and he gave a gasp of grim pleasure as he found his pistols were safe in their spring-top holsters.

"I'll need 'em—need 'em bad!" he muttered, lifting a foot and finding a stirrup. "Steady, Boy! I'm not—Ugh!"

Slowly, painfully he climbed into the saddle, but once firmly seated across the familiar tree, that very contact seemed to lend him new strength and clearness of brain. All genuine horsemen can appreciate this, for all of them have, sooner or later, felt much the same thing.

Riding slowly at first, but quickening his pace as his shaken nerves grew steadier, Maverick Mark headed once more for Hand-cuff Ranch, ready to help or to fight, just as circumstances required.

He slackened his pace as he caught sight of the hacienda, and now tolerably fit for work, he slipped out of the saddle and motioned Yellow Boy to follow on velvet feet.

That caution proved needless, but as a man of experience in wild life, Maverick Mark never once thought to regret so acting. It was part of his duty, and that settled it.

Having first made sure that the enemy had left, he entered the hacienda before more closely examining the other buildings; and guided by the still burning lamp, caught sight of Colonel Cannon, bound in his chair of interwoven antlers, his head bowed upon his chest, looking far more like a corpse than one alive.

First closing the door behind him, to guard against a possible shot in the back from some skulking foe, Maverick Mark crossed the room and placed a hand on Cannon's shoulder, saying:

"Rouse up, colonel, and tell a friend just what devilry's been doing here!"

"Devil! have you not tortured me sufficient?" gasped the blinded ranch-owner, with renewed desperation striving to burst his bonds.

"Steady, friend!" in distinct tones cried the Man from Nowhere. "I am a friend, colonel. Open your eyes and look for yourself, man!"

"God! I have no eyes! I'm blind—blind—blind!"

By this time a keen knife had cut the bonds, but Maverick Mark saw that it would be useless to ask further questions while the rancher was so sorely shaken, and the next few minutes were given over to restorative work.

He examined those swollen, inflamed orbs, gaining hope as he did so, for he could not think sight had been entirely destroyed. And noticing a powdery substance sprinkled on the polished table-top, he both touched and tasted it, crying out in genuine glee:

"Red pepper, colonel! Bad enough, no doubt, but it might have been worse! Cheer up, man! You'll see to put out the light of the devil who doped you, or I'm a howling liar from backwaters!"

Even his voice was a stimulant, and before long Colonel Cannon was able to give a hasty sketch of his sufferings, begging him to make sure that his senses had not deceived him.

"Eloise—look for her!" he groaned, sinking helplessly back in his chair. "I'm no use! Help her—if you're a white man!"

Maverick Mark needed no urgings to set about learning the exact state of affairs, and first making sure no other being was to be found in the hacienda, he hurried across to the other buildings, there finding and freeing the servants.

From their lips he learned a few additional particulars, but nothing more than he had already surmised.

"It's the Black Jaguar's work, beyond a doubt!" he muttered, pressing across to where that cunning ambush had been planted.

He found the bullet-riddled body of the horse he had taken from the Rustlers as a mount for Eugene Cannon, but no traces of its last rider. And with one fear removed—for he was by no means sure the nearly crazed father had really spoken to his son—he hastened back to the hacienda, where some of the women were doing what lay in their power for Colonel Cannon.

"Both Eugene and Miss Thornton have been carried off by the Black Jaguar, colonel," he reported, bluntly, then adding in cold, stern tones: "But I swear to follow and rescue them, if man of mortal mold can accomplish it! I'll bring them back to you, safe and sound, or I'll die trying!"

"Heaven grant you may, Maverick!" moaned the sorely afflicted man.

"I believe it will, but I'll need backing, colonel, and I'm going to fire your stables to raise a beacon big enough to bring all your neighbors this way, hot-foot, ready for hotter work!"

"Do it! Burn everything! Only—save my poor children!"

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE BLACK JAGUAR'S LAIR.

THE rendezvous in Mexico given Pablo Acosta by Carlita Quesado, was one admirably fitted for that purpose, since it had been a sort of "robbers' roost" for many a long year gone by.

During his brilliant if brief career as King of the Rustlers, Seraphin Quesado had made this refuge his headquarters, where he could lie in comfortable security while resting from one wild raid and planning another.

While in that happy valley, he had never taken thought of danger for himself or for his raiders. It was too far from the border for even the dare-devil Texans to venture. If soldiers, wearing the uniform of his, as well as their country, should draw too nigh for comfort, what more easy than to blind their eyes? A

very small fistful of yellow coin was sufficient for that, as no man knew better.

Then, after King Seraphin bade adieu to this world and all its tribulations, taking his departure via the Hempen Route, his retreat, as well as his mantle, fell to his twin sister, Carlita Quesado, afterward to add still greater glory to the name as the Black Jaguar.

It was for this point that she bade Pablo Acosta strike, as directly as possible while taking due pains to break his trail, and here it was that she herself headed for, with Eloise Thornton under her charge.

Truly, it seemed as though Carlita had been inspired when she sung so confidently of her lucky star, for everything went well with her little party, and the Rio Grande was reached without adventure worthy of note.

As they left the water for Mexican soil, however, an incident took place which merits note, since by so doing a thread dropped some ways back will be gathered to the main yarn; and that was a meeting with Don Melchior Gayferos and the remnant of his squad of raiders.

It is quite possible that the Don would have delayed that juncture a trifle longer had he not been assured by one of his spies that the captive wrested from their clutches by that wild Texan devil was now safely held by Pablo Acosta, whose squad was rapidly nearing the border. Then, too, Lota Quesado was no longer in his company, having chosen to make her own way back to Mexico, rather than risk persecutions at his hands, and so he could arrange his excuses to suit his own ideas of what was wisest and most likely to profit his pocket.

The Black Jaguar was in too high glee at the complete success of her plans, so far, to prove a very harsh censor, even when Don Melchior admitted that his contemplated bride had left him in a huff.

"The little fool!" frowned Carlita, only to smile viciously the next moment, saying: "But she is not so much to blame as is the person who betrayed our destination. So—find me that traitor, Melchior, and never a gibe shall you hear from my lips!"

The Tiger's Den was reached in safety by both squads, and once there, the Black Jaguar smoothed over all hard feelings among her band of cut-throats by paying them even more liberally than she had vowed before taking up the trail for Hand-cuff Ranch.

She hardly waited to catch one good night's sleep before taking a fresh horse and setting forth—all might guess on what errand, but none of them could speak with authority. All the rank and file knew was that both Black Jaguar and Don Melchior Gayferos had departed, leaving Pablo Acosta in charge of the Retreat.

That same retreat was well worthy a closer description, though words alone can give but an imperfect idea of its nature. True, one can imagine a short, narrow valley, or "pocket," lying in a horse-shoe shaped curve, where the hills rose in almost perpendicular rolls of vine-clad rock, on three sides of the rendezvous. The other side was open, so far as elevation was concerned, but the mouth of the little valley opened upon a tract of chaparral so dense, so thorny, so forbidding in all respects, that one ignorant of its secrets would hesitate long before attempting to enter its depths.

Yet there were trails entering not only the chaparral, but the valley beyond, when patiently sought for. And since those trails might be found, and an entrance forced even against bullet and steel, it would seem taking entirely too long chances for a Rustler to thus pen himself up where escape in such an emergency would be impossible.

So more than one had thought, when first viewing that retreat, in the time of King Seraphin as well as the later reign of Queen Carlita. But when they had been tested and prove true, they were far wiser than when that doubt found birth.

As yet neither Eloise Thornton nor Eugene Cannon had reached that height of wisdom, and just now, while idly moving about within the limits assigned by Pablo Acosta, their expressions were anything but jovious, although they were talking in low tones about escaping.

"It's got to be done, if done at all, before that devil in the shape of a woman comes back!" was the conclusion reached by the young man.

"If it only might be!" murmured Eloise, with a long and longing sigh. "But can it? And how?"

Cannon made no answer, simply because he had none ready. It was easy enough to declare that they must escape from their captors before a certain date, but when it came to showing just when and how that escape was to be engineered—well, that was quite another thing!

"Do you know," hastily whispered Eloise, her brown eyes coming back from a brief tour of inspection. "I am half-tempted to beg that girl to assist us, Eugene!"

"She could if she would, but—" hesitated her companion, his eyes also taking note of that slowly-approaching figure.

It belonged to Lota Quesado, and while she had looked very attractive in the half-masculine garb she wore when Eugene first saw her, she

seemed tenfold as charming now that her garb was better suited to her real sex.

"Am I intruding, señorita?" she asked, in low, musical tones; but while her words were addressed to Eloise, her blue eyes rested on the young man's face, half-timidly, half-beseechingly, the rich color coming and going in her velvety cheeks as she awaited reply.

She spoke in very slightly-accented English, and taking into connection her golden hair, her blue eyes, her fair complexion, it was difficult to believe she was of Spanish descent. And it was still harder to feel that one with such a sweet voice, such an innocent, child-like smile, could be a bitter, uncompromising enemy.

"Can captives complain of intrusion?" cried Eloise, with sudden bitterness, which was not entirely assumed for the occasion. "Are we not helpless, even against insult?"

"Eloise—sister!" muttered Eugene, flushing hotly as he saw Lota shrink back, her face paling, a hurt or frightened look coming into her blue eyes.

Lota quickly rallied, moving forward until her hand could gently touch Eloise on an arm, and then she said, unsteadily:

"If I could aid you, señorita, the saints know how gladly I would do so! If any man but Pablo Acosta was in charge, or if—"

"If you were aught but a weak, timorous girl!" quickly supplemented Eloise, her red lips curling as with scorn, her proud figure rising above the Mexican girl.

Lota flashed a half-indignant, half-pleading look into her face, then dropped her hand and beat a rapid retreat.

"Have we got so many friends here that you need go out of your way to insult the first that shows up?" suikily growled the young rancher, his gaze following that trim, graceful figure in its retreat.

"Did I do that?" laughed Eloise, her eyes sparkling.

"If you didn't, I'd like to know!"

"And they call such as you the lords of creation! They locate all wisdom in your brains, and—not one of us poor, helpless women but what can teach you more in an hour than you could learn by yourselves in a month!"

"Of some things, no doubt, but who cares to learn them?"

"Now you're simply spiteful, Eugene, and that is one of our prerogatives."

"And that is tautology, as yonder poor girl can help me bear witness," grimly retorted Cannon. "If your treatment of her wasn't pure spitefulness, then I'd like to know! And only a breath before, you was hinting at asking her to set us free from this ugly trap!"

"Maybe you'll appreciate my reasons for so acting before long, my cousin," then altering her tone and manner, asking seriously: "Are you so bent on escaping, Eugene?"

"Can you ask that? Only for you, I'd have made the attempt long before this. At the very worst, death is preferable to such a captivity, and they couldn't have done more than that!"

"If there was no other hope, I'd say the same thing, Eugene, but we surely may hope yet a little longer? We have true-hearted friends who must even now be at work in our behalf? Our neighbors—even the man who saved us from those stampeding horses?"

"He was killed, that night, worse luck!"

"How do you know? Only through the vapor-ing boasts of these villainous rascals, and they would rather lie than eat or drink! But even if what they say is true, there are others. Among them, Uncle Creed."

"Crippled, blinded, even if he lived through that black night!" dejectedly groaned the young man. "I tell you, Eloise, I've got to do something decisive, and that mighty quick, or I'll go crazy—clean crazy!"

"Lota says that it is not so bad as we feared. Uncle Creed was not blinded, only for the time-being. And her mother is the Black Jaguar, remember. No doubt she learned the truth from her."

"That merciless fiend speak the truth? Bah!" with a short, hard laugh as he turned impatiently away. "No truth could come through her lips, or the lips of any of her foul breeding!"

"Steady, Gene," her firm hand catching his arm and bringing them face to face. "You are the unjust one, now! Lota may not be perfect, but she has some good traits. I can't think of her as that woman's own child. As you say, the Black Jaguar is simply a fiend, but Lota—she has a heart that can feel for the suffering, the true heart of a woman, indeed, if she only was given a fair chance for herself."

"Don't I know that?" he said, in almost fierce tones, his face turning white, his eyes glowing with a fire that caused Eloise to shrink involuntarily back a pace. "Didn't I see as much when she interfered to save me from the insults of that devil, Gayferos, the night he had me bound to a tree? Haven't I seen the same thing, each day that we have been kept here, herded like cattle?"

A smile was dawning on the maiden's face, and as he noted this, his face flushed hotly, his eyes sunk, and he would have turned away as before, only that Eloise arrested his flight.

"Eugene Cannon!"

"Well, what of it?" frowning darkly, but meeting her gaze without flinching.

"How much of all this do you really mean?"

"Every word that crossed my lips!"

"I didn't mean your words so much as your looks. Do you know what your eyes said to me, cousin?"

"If they said anything—"

"They spoke volumes, dear boy," laughing, but patting his arm with a touch that was almost motherly. "Shall I tell you how I interpreted their speech, Eugene?"

"What's the use," his eyes sinking, but a half-dogged expression coming into his face. "I'm not ashamed to own up. It's Gospel truth, Eloise! With less than half a chance I could love that girl to kill!"

"Even though she is the Black Jaguar's child?"

"Haven't I tried my level best to hate and curse her on that account? Why, girl, if I could show you my heart, you'd see my fingerprints where I've tried to squeeze that fool's fancy out of it, to the last drop! Tried, and failed! And if I don't get out of this before another couple days, I'll be so far gone that I can't go at all!"

"Unless Lota goes with you, why not say, cousin?"

Before Eugene could ask an explanation of that meaning whisper, there came an alarm from near the mouth of the valley; wild yells, swift shooting, followed by the clatter of horses' hoofs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DRUNKEN BULLY.

"QUICK! to cover, Eloise!" cried Cannon, dragging his companion toward the nearest patch of undergrowth, his first and most natural thought being that friends had attacked the Rustlers in their retreat. "They mustn't pen us up, now! Ready to join—"

Even so soon that brief, delirious hope was ended.

The wild, unearthly scream of the Mexican tiger rung forth shrilly, and the horseman who just then dashed into full view, was greeted with welcoming cheers by the Rustlers, instead of with hot lead or cold steel.

"That evil wretch, Don Melchoir!" gasped Eloise, shrinking back with shivering disgust.

And she was right. Whooping, yelling, flourishing his pistols and firing an occasional shot until each cylinder was emptied, causing his sweat-dripping steed to cavort madly in short circles, from time to time repeating the wild slogan of the Black Jaguar, Don Melchoir Gayferos celebrated his return from that as yet unexplained mission in company with Carlita Quesado.

Even to stranger eyes that reckless fanfare was partly based on bad whisky, and this knowledge possibly led Pablo Acosta a little out of his regular way, in order to guard against the fellow's doing serious mischief.

"Welcome back, Don Melchoir," the giant said, never flinching as the drunken knave sent his horse at full speed directly toward him.

With a jerk that sent his panting horse back upon its haunches, Gayferos halted when another leap must have knocked Acosta down, and he laughed harshly as the big fellow added in cold tones:

"You have a strong arm, Don Melchoir, but I wouldn't advise you to repeat the act. The master would suffer for what his steed couldn't help doing."

"Which means?"

"If knocked down by your horse, I would have risen in time to kill its master. Nothing more than that, Don Melchoir Gayferos."

"Where is my mother, Don Melchoir?" asked Lota, springing forward in time to separate the two strong men. "Is she coming?"

"When her work is accomplished, my angel," with an elaborate bow as his hat swept the side of his abused horse. "Until then, behold her humble representative in Don Melchoir Gayferos!"

"The Black Jaguar sent you to supersede me, then?" coldly asked Acosta, while Lota fell back, taking advantage of that question and answer to look for the two prisoners.

They were standing in fair view, hardly rallied from their bitter disappointment, but as she caught Lota's warning gesture, Eloise caught Cannon by the arm, urging him back under cover, where they were speedily joined by her of the golden locks.

"You look frightened, Lota," said Eloise, in her own tongue, with which she had found the Mexican girl perfectly familiar.

"Tis on your account, more than my own, Miss Thornton!" Lota hurriedly replied, casting an uneasy glance back in the direction from whence she came. "That knave has been drinking heavily, and that ever turns him to evil!"

"Let him keep his distance, or he'll need a set of false teeth!" grimly growled the young rancher.

"No, no! you must not—I pray you, dear sir, to try and bear with the drunken brute in case he comes to abuse you!" cried Lota, in her

anxiety clasping his arm with both of her hands.

"Surely he will not dare use violence?" asked Eloise.

"He may try. He is a very demon when drunk. But if you do not anger him by talking back, or showing how justly you detest him, words will be his heaviest weapons."

"Not mine, though!" and Eugene clinched his fists viciously.

"No, no, cousin! what could you do against—"

"Knock him silly, to begin with, then—he's got good guns, or he wouldn't be a Rustler! With them in my hands, I reckon I could start a first-class circus, even if I couldn't stand off the entire gang!"

"'Twould be your death to try," swiftly added Lota, her eyes betraying even more than had the eyes of Eugene Cannon a brief space earlier. "Promise me you will bear with the drunken brute, at least—"

"Not if he cuts up too mighty rough, little lady," in softened tones, his hands catching hers and pressing them warmly, unmindful of the faint smile with which Eloise was watching them.

"He shall do no actual harm—no violence, though I have to shoot him for the vile dog he is! I swear this—pray believe me, sir?"

"I do—because I can't help it, Lota!" and as a further proof, the young man swiftly dropped a kiss on those upturned lips.

With an inarticulate cry, Lota broke away in flight, but pausing at the edge of the covert, to touch a finger-tip to those red lips.

There was scarce time for this silent warning to be given, before there came the sound of heavy feet, and shortly after both Pablo Acosta and Don Melchoir came into view, approaching their captives.

The taller Mexican was always grave, generally stern in face, but just now he seemed more than usually gloomy. He had not yet fully admitted the superior authority asserted by the drunken knave at his side, and neither had he flatly refused to transfer his important charge to those hands, just then so utterly unfit to guard it.

On the contrary, Don Melchoir Gayferos seemed in fairly wild spirits, smiling so broadly that grin better describes his expression. His naturally handsome face was rendered brutal by drunkenness, his eyes were bloodshot, leering as those of a satyr now they had caught sight of Eloise Thornton, her fine figure drawn proudly erect, her face paler but even more beautiful to his eyes, accustomed to the dusky-hued senoritas of his native land.

"H'la!" he cried, giving a drunken laugh as he came to a halt, his heavy brows arched with mock amazement as he stared at the figure. "You've led me astray, Pablo Acosta! This is not Black Jaguar Valley, but paradise. Yonder is not a captive, but an enslaver! Not a heretical Tejana, but a veritable angel—houri—enchanted!"

Eugene Cannon snapped his teeth together, turning pale with rage at those words, but Eloise swiftly stepped in front of him, whispering, hurriedly:

"Quiet, cousin! For my sake, if not for hers or your own! I am not afraid of the drunken bully while yon big man is near."

"If the cur dares so much as touch you with his finger-tip, I'll down him, if it costs my life!"

"But not if it costs mine—and it will, if either!" as swiftly whispered the maiden, then advancing another step or two.

With a drunken lurch Don Melchoir broke away from the hand with which Pablo Acosta touched his arm, his hands going out in advance, his face wearing what was meant for an alluring smile, his husky tones crying:

"Behold thy slave, fair lady! Chivalry kneeling at the feet of beauty!" almost falling upon his face as he suited the action to his words. "Your hand, my angel of beautiful light, that I may seal my devotion with a chaste salute!"

He attempted to grasp her hand, but Eloise started back, finding the ordeal, even so soon, to be beyond her endurance.

Her face so plainly betrayed her utter disgust and loathing, that even a drunken brute could not misinterpret, and Don Melchoir sprung to his feet in a rage, that emotion apparently overcoming in part the dizzying fumes of the bad liquor he had swallowed so freely.

"So, so!" he hoarsely cried, his face fairly purple with rage, his eyes glowing even redder than their surroundings. "You're too dainty for even the lips of an honest gentleman to touch!"

"I can bid you good-day, if that is what you wish, sir," coldly interposed Eloise, again standing her ground, her spirit rising against even the suspicion of threats.

"You can and shall do more! What? You, my captive, my slave, my plaything, if I so elect? You dare limit my advances, my reward? You?"

"I am no living man's slave, sir!"

"But you shall be—I swear it by all that's holy!" still speaking in English, as he had from the outset. "Unless you find wisdom right speedily, my dainty bird! You may have a

choice: in me you behold one of two things: your master or your slave! Which shall it be?"

"Neither the first nor the last," coldly said Eloise, and she would probably have put her meaning into still plainer speech, only for the sudden action taken by Eugene Cannon.

Until now he had held his fierce passions in check, fearing the consequences, not for himself, but for his cousin. But now his strong arm swung Eloise aside and behind him, facing the two Mexicans with pale face and blazing eyes, his voice harsh and wicked as he spoke to Pablo Acosta:

"You have charge here, I believe. Is it part of your orders to permit this drunken cur to insult a lady, without trying to check him?"

Don Melchoir gave a howl of rage as he recognized the young man, and, lifting his quirt, he cried, harshly:

"Who dared set you free? Down, cur, and lick your master's feet!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE NAME OF THE BLACK JAGUAR.

It was not a meaningless gesture on his part, though suggested, no doubt, by the handle of his whip touching his wrist as it swung by the rawhide loop after the ordinary fashion. It was as much part of a Mexican cavalier's dress as his spurs, and nearly as often brought into play.

Even as he hissing pronounced those words, Don Melchoir Gayferos swung the pliant rawhide through the air, striking fair at the face of the young rancher.

Instead of reaching its mark, the lash was intercepted by Cannon's left hand, and giving a savage jerk, he drew the drunken bully forward to meet the hard fist that shot out straight from the shoulder.

Never in his life had Eugene delivered a cleaner, better-timed blow than that. And Don Melchoir went back even faster than he had come forward, his heels rising as his shoulders lowered, his head denting the virgin soil with a force that sent hat and kerchief flying, laying bare the still raw scar where Maverick Mark had dropped him with his snap-shot, that night of the rescue against long odds.

Any ordinary man would have lain where he fell, for some little time, but Don Melchoir seemed proof against moderate shocks, and with a howl of crazy revenge, he scrambled to his feet and jerked forth a revolver.

Where he had meant humiliation before, he now meant murder, and if Eugene Cannon had been obliged to depend solely upon himself, more blood would have flowed than that which trickled down that knuckle-marked visage.

"Whelp of the dog!" howled Gayferos, as his weapon came up from his middle. "I'll kill you like a—"

"Peace, Gayferos!" sternly thundered Pablo Acosta, catching that armed hand and forcing it upward, just in time to let the bullet waste its powers on the branches overhead.

And at the same instant a lithe young figure sprung in front of Cannon, one hand pushing him back, the other menacing the infuriated Rustler with a pistol.

"Hold, Don Melchoir!" cried Lota, for she it was, her voice ringing out clear and distinct. "This is my mother's captive, not yours. Do him harm, without first showing her written orders, and I'll punish you in her stead. I say it—I, the Black Jaguar's cub!"

Once before she had defiantly stood between the Rustler and the young rancher. Once before it had seemed a toss-up whether or no he would not link them together in his mad vengeance.

"Peace, I say, Don Melchoir Gayferos," added the giant Rustler, paying no heed to the excited cries from behind, or the rapid trampling of human feet, telling of the alarm taken from that frustrated shot. "You have only claimed, not received full command here. I was left in charge, and until relieved from that charge by my queen, I am responsible for these prisoners."

"Do you deny my right—"

"Only until you prove it is a right, Don Melchoir."

Gayferos burst into a harsh, mocking laugh, his free hand shooting out in real or affected derision, as its owner cried:

"Have ye no jurisdiction over Lota, my master? Or is this part of your instructions, given before the Black Jaguar rode away?"

Unarmed though he was, Eugene Cannon could not hold back while a girl attempted his defense. He caught Lota around the waist, swinging her aside, an instant after she delivered that threat. He meant to leap upon Gayferos and end the matter once for all, but in this he counted without the golden-locks.

"No, no! he will murder thee!" panted Lota, clinging to him with desperate tenacity, even when his other hand came to break her hold.

And this was what Pablo Acosta beheld, when his gaze turned that way in obedience to the jeer of the drunken Rustler. Lota clinging about the neck of the young rancher, his arms seemingly embracing her lithe figure with true loverly ardor!

The maiden caught his meaning, and tearing herself away, she indignantly confronted the fellow, crying:

"Thou liest, Melchoir Gayferos! I am but defending my mother's rights, and before you shall assassinate her captive, I'll shoot you like a mad wolf!"

Now, as on that night alluded to, a sudden and complete change came over the Rustler. He permitted his pistol to drop into the ready hand of Pablo Acosta, and brushing away the drops of blood that interfered with his eyesight, he said sharply:

"Who set the captives of your mother free, Lota Quesado? Who gave orders for their bonds to be cast off?"

"Pablo Acosta, chief of all here, now that my mother is absent."

"Do you still claim that right, Don Pablo?"

"Until I see good cause to resign it to another, yes," bowed the tall Rustler, flashing a look over the Mexicans drawn to that spot by the quarrel. "The Black Jaguar left me in charge, and—"

"She now relieves you, in my favor," bluntly declared Gayferos, drawing a slip of paper from his breast and passing it over. "You will not deny her perfect right to do so much, I fancy, Acosta?"

Pablo flashed his eyes over the few words of writing held by that slip, then bowed his submission, but saying:

"The queen has spoken, and her will is my law. Still, Don Melchoir, she says naught about your having liberty to slay her captives, and while I live, their lives shall be respected, even by you!"

"Right, Pablo!" with a short, ugly laugh. "A short, swift death is all too good for the whelp! Then—you yield to the will of Black Jaguar, Acosta?"

"She is my queen. Her wish is my gospel."

"That is as it should be, for the Black Jaguar is chief over all. And if I brought a death-warrant from her, Pablo, you would not hesitate to execute it?"

"On whom, Don Melchoir?"

"On any, or all! On me, for instance?"

"'Twould be my duty to kill you, señor, and I would perform it with the greatest of pleasure," bowed the tall Rustler, grave as a sphinx.

"Not a doubt of it, my dear friend," laughed Gayferos. "But if I brought an order for their execution?" with a gesture toward the two prisoners.

"I would obey, after making perfectly sure my queen had really sent such orders."

"In still plainer words, you value their lives at a much higher figure than mine?"

"Very much higher, Don Melchoir," still in that cold, matter-of-fact tone. "You are but one man, though doubtless a marvelously good and gallant cavalier. Still, you are but one cub among many, and your place could easily be filled should fate or my queen order your exit. But these," flashing a glance toward Eugene, and bowing to Eloise, "are a great deal more. They represent not only life, but wealth. Through them our queen will not only secure revenge for the past, but our band will receive good gold for the future. And so—you comprehend?"

"I comprehend that they are far too precious prizes to be let run at will," bluntly retorted Gayferos. "In the name of the Black Jaguar, then, Pablo Acosta, I order you to see that they are not only bound, but kept in a secure place of confinement, where their escape can more easily be guarded against."

"In her name, you shall be obeyed, Don Melchoir," bowed the tall Rustler, but once more Lota Quesado interposed, crying sharply:

"Wait, Pablo! My mother never sent such an order, for how could she know that those bonds had been loosened, even in a degree?"

"The Black Jaguar made me responsible for their safe keeping when she ordered me to assume charge of this camp," harshly spoke up Don Melchoir, now showing hardly a trace of the intoxication which had led to all this excitement and rapid discussion. "By her authority I am master here. On my own responsibility I issue this order: bind both of yonder people, and place them in confinement, under guard!"

Lota hesitated, her face hotly flushed, her eyes glittering, but hardly knowing just how to face down that harsh autocrat, now that Pablo Acosta had yielded to his assumption of authority.

"Your ears are open, Pablo Acosta?" sternly added Gayferos. "On my head fall the punishment if I am doing wrong in the eyes of our queen. Will you do your duty, or shall I call on my men to bear a hand?"

Pablo stepped toward the captives, and Eugene put up his hands in good form, grimly speaking:

"I'd heap sight rather he was leading, Pablo, but you can't take one side of me without fighting 'em both! Of course I can't thrash the entire outfit, but I can and will leave some knuckle-painting for the outer circle to admire when the seance is over!"

He meant every word he said, too, and there was a prospect for a really elegant if short-lived ruction, but Eloise Thornton spoilt it.

Springing forward, she twined her arms about his, hurriedly pleading submission to the inevitable.

"For my sake, if not for your own, dear cousin!" she murmured, her lips almost brushing his ear as she resisted his vigorous efforts to cast her off in time to receive the enemy. "They only seek an excuse for doing murder, and if my sole friend and protector is slain, what frightful doom will be mine?"

Even that swift plea might have failed, so fiercely angry was the young rancher; but even as he loosened one of those tightly-clinging arms, he caught a glimpse of Lota's face.

She had moved aside and back, as Pablo Acosta stepped forward. She was partially hidden behind a bush, so far as Don Melchoir was concerned. But Eugene could see her head and shoulders, and just then a warning glance met his eyes. Plainly as though her lips had called out the words, Lota bade him yield without further struggle, bade him hope for the best, bade him trust his fate to her hands.

"Do your duty, Pablo Acosta!" harshly cried his temporary master. "Bind the whelp or admit that you are afraid of his naked hands!"

"Why should I fear what I have never felt, Don Melchoir?" coldly asked the giant, a grim smile marking his swarthy visage as he cast a glance at that blood-marked face.

"Bind them, I say, or—forward, men, and lend him aid!"

"One is sufficient, Don Melchoir. Mendez, will you procure thongs?"

"With pleasure, Don Pablo!" responded that worthy, hastening away to fill that order.

"And you, señor," added Acosta, bowing to the young rancher, far more politely than he had greeted his now superior. "I beg of you not to bring punishment on your own head. The queen has given this gentleman full authority to act, and his commands must be obeyed. Shall I use force, or will you hear reason and quietly submit?"

"For my sake, Eugene!" pleaded Eloise.

"All right," rather sulkily muttered the plucky young fellow, holding out his joined hands. "It's for her sake, mind you, Pablo."

"I comprehend, señor."

"I'll let you truss me up, but not that cowardly brute!" flashing a vengeful glance toward Don Melchoir. "Rather than permit his foul touch on my person, I'll kill him or be killed myself!"

With such overwhelming odds gathered before him, this was anything but a prudent speech to make. And if Don Melchoir had not been pretty thoroughly sobered off by what had transpired since his coming upon the scene, those words might have cost their author dear.

But Gayferos had his own schemes in view, and now that his brain was once more clear enough for coherent thought, he merely laughed at words which broke no bones.

"Your life is safe, whelp of the blind spaniel," he retorted, with an ugly laugh. "There are far worse things than speedy death, and I owe all present my grateful thanks for defeat. If my lead had sped true, I would be most bitterly cursing my hasty action!"

Just then Mendez came up with thongs of rawhide, and Pablo Acosta deftly bound the young rancher.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CASTING A POISONED DART.

DON MELCHOIR watched the operation, raising no objections to the manner in which it was performed, though Pablo Acosta showed far more leniency than he would have deemed necessary, had he disliked his new master less thoroughly.

He drew Eugene's arms back, loosely uniting them above the elbows, then binding his wrists together. He slipped snug loops around each ankle, but left nearly a foot play, rendering it possible for the young rancher to walk without assistance.

This done, he gave Lota thongs with which to serve Eloise after the same fashion, and when her deft fingers had completed their task, he bade the lady lead her back to her former prison, himself taking Cannon in charge.

Don Melchoir watched each movement, smiling grimly as he tugged at his heavy mustaches, or tenderly brushed away the thickening drops of blood let free by those iron knuckles.

"He means mischief, good Pablo!" Lota whispered, as they came close together in front of a cabin of logs, where the captives were to be immured. "Watch and foil him, in my mother's name!"

Acosta said naught, but the swift flash of his dark eyes gave Lota no slight relief. If not into a positive friend, the actions of Don Melchoir had converted the giant from his active enmity.

"I will see you soon," murmured Lota, her words addressed to Eloise, but her blue eyes talking to Eugene. "Hope for the best! That villain shall not harm you while Lota Quesado draws the breath of life!"

When he saw the prisoners fairly across the threshold of the log cabin, Don Melchoir hast-

ened away to bathe his rapidly-swelling eyes, and cleanse his person.

His manner was in strong contrast to that exhibited on first entering the valley, and one who did not know him intimately might fancy his downfall had literally "taken the starch out of him." But those who could do so without too openly betraying their wish, kept well apart from the desperado.

With a man of his character and disposition, there was no telling when and where his next blows were to fall, and this unusual calm was something like the oppressive stillness which heralds the devastating tornado.

Having taken a partial bath, and cared for his darkening eyes as well as circumstances permitted, Don Melchoir called for food and drink, eating heartily of the one, but "hitting the bottle" lightly. Possibly he was just beginning to realize that a man can do wiser things than to turn his stomach into a demijohn.

Having satisfied his hunger, Don Melchoir rolled a cigarro deftly with one hand, ignited it at the little camp-fire, then strolled across to where Pablo Acosta was half-reclining under a shady tree.

He spoke quietly, showing no shade of resentment for the blunt words those grim lips had shaped, not long before. He seemed to have forgotten or forgiven all that had gone cross-ways since his arrival, and as his advances were met in like spirit, while naught save business matters was broached, all went smoothly, and those who watched with covert anxiety began to breathe freely once more.

This was good policy on Don Melchoir's part. He knew that, man for man, Pablo Acosta was far more popular than himself, and that if it was to come to an actual conflict of authority between them, nearly every member of the company would side in with the big fellow.

Nothing in that conversation calls for record here, and the point is merely touched upon to explain how a truce was brought about between the two acknowledged master-spirits of that gathering.

While making play with his tongue, Don Melchoir did not permit his eyes to rest idle, and though they were rapidly "going into mourning" over that clean knock-down, they were able to note whither Lota went after parting with the captives in whom she appeared to take such an uncommon degree of interest. And when his business with Pablo Acosta was completed, the Rustler quietly sought out the child of the Black Jaguar, coming upon her in a spot from whence she could not escape him, without openly declaring her strong aversion.

"A word with you, fair Lota," was his half-mocking salutation, his hat coming off with a flourish, revealing the replaced bandage which hid the scar inflicted by Maverick Mark, a week and more before, when he so daringly rescued Eugene Cannon from the Rustlers.

"One word will be more than sufficient, Don Melchoir, and that word you have already spoken."

"Then yet another, my evasive angel," laughed the desperado, in no wise abashed by that pointed hint that his absence was better liked than his company. "Though it must come through my lips, 'tis a word from thy mother, child."

"My mother would send no word of importance by thy lips," coldly retorted Lota, giving a swift shrug of her fair shoulders that caused his hand to fall short of the mark aimed at. "Or, if so, I am quite willing to let you remain its keeper until mother returns to claim the charge."

"But I am not," dropping his chaffing tone and assuming one more serious. "Hear that message you must, Lota."

"Must?" echoed the girl, proudly. "Must, and to me?"

"Even so, my proud beauty," bowed Gayferos, his tones growing still sharper. "The Black Jaguar would have sent a message still more stern, could she even have suspected what I have seen since my return."

"Your fall, for instance?" mocked the maiden, laughing at the memory.

"Your arms around that whelp's neck, rather!" flashed the Rustler. "Stop, girl!" as Lota, her face flushing with anger, would have sprung past him to gain the more open ground. "You shall listen to me, though I have to shout the words aloud after thy fleeing shape! And—Go, then, if you prefer the whole pack of cubs to hear, my wild bird!"

"Say your say, Don Melchoir, but beware how you flavor it with insult," coldly warned Lota, facing him with paling face and glittering eyes. "Even your thick skull is not quite proof against a bullet!"

"Why have you changed so completely, Lota?" his tones growing less harsh, something of the old affection returning to his eyes. "Why will you widen the breach which has been growing up between us? Time was when you were mild and gentle and loving as—"

"Time was when you were a gentleman, at least in seeming!" coldly interrupted the maiden, shrinking from his offered hand with actual loathing. "Say your say, and let me go my way, Don Melchoir."

"As you will, Lota of the hot temper," mocked the Rustler. "And as the beginning, what did the Black Jaguar bid me tell thee? To guard well that silly heart of thine, and not to look too long upon the handsome face worn by the spaniel's whelp!"

"You lie, Don Melchoir!" flashed the girl, flushing hotly. "My mother never sent such message to her daughter by your lips!"

"If I am wrong, the Black Jaguar can correct me when she returns and listens to your plea, Lota. She told me just that, and why? Not entirely because that handsome captive is son of her worst enemy: of the man who caused the shameful death of her twin brother, Seraphin Quesado; though that fact alone surely ought to be sufficient to keep love from the heart of the girl who calls that twin sister mother!"

"Do you dare charge me with this weakness?"

"Ask your blue eyes that question, Lota," laughed the Rustler. "Ask it of your fair face, when its owner thought my lash was about to cut through covering to hide of yonder cur!"

"If he is cur, what can we term the one who fell so easily before his bare hand?" sneered Lota.

"Your best friend, since you deny me a nearer, dearer title, my jewel beyond all price," bowed Don Melchoir. "But—can you kiss the holy cross and make oath that your heart is fast locked against that whelp, child of the Black Jaguar?"

Lota proudly faced her tormentor, and a smile came to her red lips during the brief silence. Then, her voice calm and steady, she spoke:

"I will take no oath at bidding of yours, Don Melchoir. For one thing, you have no right to exert authority over me. For another, it would be like a devil asking for holy water! You are too utterly sinful to even mention that holy relic!"

"And you are—simply perfection, of course! But can you even say that you are *not* in love with Eugene Cannon, Lota?"

"If I were, I would not be ashamed to own as much. Enemy though he may be to me and mine, he is a true man and an honest gentleman!"

"He is a great deal more than that, Lota, which brings me back to the cause of Carlita Quesado sending you such a warning. It would be worse than madness for you to fall in love with the whelp, even if he should return that insane passion. For, Lota Quesado, the man you know as Eugene Cannon, is none other than your own brother!"

"'Tis false—false as thy black soul!" gasped the maiden, staggering back from those words as she might have recoiled from a blow.

"'Tis simple truth, Lota," laughed Don Melchoir, maliciously. "If you doubt my truth, go ask Pablo Acosta. He can swear to all I've said. Go ask him, and if he denies the fact, call for me to face him down!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

ROPING A TIGRESS.

WITHOUT the faintest suspicion of pending peril, Carlita Quesado rode along, her head bent as if in meditation, the reins drooping idly from her fingers, as though her horse was free to select its own course.

To one who had never seen her before, the Black Jaguar might very easily have been mistaken for what she just then seemed: a Mexican ranchero, out for his health, since one on business would hardly be riding so slowly.

Her garb was purely masculine now, where it had been but partially masculine during her visit to Hand-cuff Ranch; but while the style of dress—short jacket, innocent of button-holes in use, though buttons there were in profusion, ruffled shirt-bosom and loosely-folded sash of china crape—was well-calculated to disguise all feminine contours, those eager eyes watching her approach from ambush, never for an instant were deceived.

"The Black Jaguar, for big money! She's coming, but she mustn't go! Ready, and hold your breath, boys!"

"We'll swaller her so quick they won't be time to stretch a muscle in the thrapple o' us, boss!" grinned one of the mates.

"Your bread-basket'd open so mighty quick you'd think lightning had struck it, pardner! She's too mighty rich a meal to be lost after that fashion, and while I'd hate to waste a good lad of your size, I'd do it double over, rather than have harm come to the Black Jaguar!"

All this in hurried whispers, and while the rider was too far distant from their cover for any danger to be born of speech.

But as the rider came nearer, still buried in deep reflection, not a sound arose to warn her of that snare, just on the point of being sprung.

With his rope already in motion, Maverick Mark sprung into sight, his *riato* falling fairly over head and shoulders of the Black Jaguar, tightening with a sharp jerk that caused her to sway in her seat. And, at the same time, other loops from opposite sides of the narrow trail caught and held the startled horse.

"You're my meat, critter!" cried the Man from Nowhere, with pardonable exultation as he recognized the full value of his catch.

But he seemed a trifle premature in his tri-

umph. Even as that fatal noose closed about her, Carlita Quesado snatched a knife from her girdle, and the pliant rope cut itself against the edge so dexterously managed.

"Say ye will, do ye?" snarled Maverick Mark, dropping rope and leaping upon his prey the instant he caught that glimmer of steel. "Play ye don't, just for fun!"

A sweep of his left arm parried that venomous thrust and sent the knife flashing in a bright wheel through the sunlight. His right arm flew about her middle, his hands joining and tearing her from the saddle.

That was no time for mistaken tenderness. She was hardly to be treated as a woman, as one of the so-called weaker sex, after the evil she had wrought.

Before the Black Jaguar was fairly captured, her arms bound with the sash taken from her waist, Maverick Mark was quite ready to admit that he had overcome more than one man who had boasted of being "a chief," with far less trouble than Carlita Quesado occasioned him.

"Reg'lar tiger-cat, hain't she, boss?" grinned one of the cowboys, when the Man from Nowhere at length drew back to inspect his work.

"I'd rather fight a whole litter of the regular breed," frankly admitted the Texan, wiping his heated brow. "If I hadn't got in the first grip, blamed if I don't believe she'd have flaxed out the entire bunch of us!"

Fiercely as she had fought, now that fighting longer was out of the question, Carlita Quesado lay motionless where Maverick Mark left her for the moment. But her brain was busy, and her black eyes were taking in everything that came within their range.

She heard and fully comprehended those words, and she must have understood her full peril. Yet she showed no sign, and when Maverick Mark turned to look into her face, all he saw was an expression of mingled scorn and indignation.

"Dog! Shadow of a man!" she said, in Spanish. "Can ye find no blind and crippled members of your own vile sex to practice upon? Must ye so vilely assault a donna, whose only crime lies in being a woman?"

"Well, old lady, you reel off Spanish like a book, but—"

"Speak in a Christian tongue, ladrone!"

"Just what I'm trying to do, and get you to do, Carlita," laughed the Man from Nowhere, gazing with unconcealed interest into the face of his captive.

"I comprehend no English. Speak my tongue, or I remain forever silent!"

"You couldn't do that, on oath, Carlita," laughed Maverick Mark. "You couldn't even begin to keep your word, being a woman. But—Spanish goes! Senorita Carlita—or is it senora?"

"What means this vile assault, senor?" sternly demanded the woman, still true to her text, though that name warned her how narrow was her chance. "What right have ladrones, even, to molest a lady who has done no wrong?"

"Then the Black Jaguar still lays claim to the title of lady?"

"I know no jaguar, black, or yellow, or any other color. Once more I demand a reason for this vile outrage, senor!"

"It is at your disposition, senora. You are Carlita Quesado, better known, perhaps, as the Black Jaguar, leader of the worst band of *salteadores* in all Mexico. And as such there is a heavy reward hanging over your head, quick or dead."

"Thou liest!" fiercely cried the captive, wrestling with the stout sash that held her arms. "I am Senora Inez Velasquez, and—"

"You are Carlita Quesado, the Black Jaguar!"

"Again I say thou liest!"

"And I might repeat my words, not once, but a thousand times," the Man from Nowhere laughed, shortly. "But since you are a woman, with the tongue befitting your sex, I reckon I'll use argument instead of wind."

Although he began in Spanish, Maverick Mark slipped easily back to his own dialect, closely watching his captive, hoping to surprise her in at least one slip. But if she understood his last sentence, she never showed as much on her face or in her eyes.

"Ten thousand times would never make a lie true. I am not the ugly beast you name. I am what I am. No more, no less. But thou—that is still plainer! A cowardly ladrone, who dares molest only women, and even them from ambush!"

"If I can prove that you are Carlita Quesado, the Black Jaguar?"

"Can you prove a lie to be truth?"

"If I prove all I claim, will you agree to come to terms, Carlita?" persisted Maverick, keeping his temper well in check.

"And if you fail to supply that impossible proof, senor?" slowly asked his captive.

"I'll turn you loose, with a mule-load of apologies!" in swift English, once more laying a trap which might help him out in his difficult task—far less easy than he had calculated upon.

"I comprehend only my own language, senor. Speak Spanish," calmly uttered the woman.

Before Maverick Mark could return to the at-

tack, they were interrupted by the rapid approach of a tall, soldierly figure—none other than that of Colonel Creed Cannon, his gait banished, his inflamed eyes and deeply-lined face alone betraying aught of the tortures this woman had inflicted upon him.

"Who is it, Mark?" the colonel asked, but then, catching a fair view of that swarthy face, he gave a hoarse cry of vengeance, curving his fingers as he sprung toward the Black Jaguar.

"Steady, colonel!" cried Maverick Mark, catching the infuriated man in his arms, holding him back in spite of his furious and frantic struggles.

"I'll kill her! I'll tear her black heart out and eat it before her dying eyes! Let me go, curse ye! I'll have revenge, even if it kills me!"

"But not if it dooms your children to death, or worse, colonel!"

Even then the maddened rancher continued to struggle, but Maverick Mark, in his prime, was far more than a match for the old soldier, and by muttering well-chosen words while maintaining his grip, at length succeeded in calming the father, through fresh fears for his children.

"Give me your word as a gentleman and soldier that you'll keep hands and tools off her, colonel, or I'll keep you too far apart for questions, though you borrowed a fog-horn to ask them with!" declared the Texan, when his grip finally slackened.

"Make her confess where my children are hidden, then!"

"She shall confess all that, and much more, never you borrow trouble on that score, colonel. Just give me your word, and you can talk to her at first hand."

"You have it. I promise, Mark."

"Good enough!" stepping back, with a bright smile. "It's all for Eugene, colonel. And for Miss Thornton, you know!"

If he heard, Colonel Cannon gave no sign. Thrusting both hands behind his back and tightly clinching them there, the more surely to resist temptation, he paused by the side of the captive, his eyes glowing redly as he gazed into her dark face for a brief space in silence.

"What have you done with my children, Carlita Quesado?" he asked, at length, each word issuing slowly, showing what an intense strain he was resisting.

Quite naturally he spoke in English, but the Black Jaguar was still upon her guard, and coldly declared that she failed to comprehend.

"I reckon you'll have to talk Spanish, colonel," laughed Maverick Mark, lightly. "She's clean forgot her English since striking Greaser-dom, it appears."

"I know naught of your children; why should I?" coldly asserted the captive, when Cannon repeated his question as advised.

Maverick Mark waited barely long enough to hear that sentence, then he turned away to whisper in the ear of a cowboy:

"Go fetch up the Greaser, pardner. Walk in front of him, and don't let her catch a glimpse of his face until he's within arm's-length of her head. Lively, now!"

In vain Colonel Cannon alternately pleaded and threatened. Through all his changes, the captive remained steadfast. She was not Carlita Quesado. She knew naught of any person's children save her own. She was Señora Inez Velasquez, bound on business of her own. As robbers, they might take her money, though that was but a trifle. They might even murder her, since they were many, she but one, and that one a weak woman. But with all their power, they could not force her to admit a lie!

"Wouldn't do it for any money, Carlita!" declared Maverick Mark, helping to keep matters moving while waiting for his messenger to return with one who he trusted would face down even this determined character. "We all know you are an angel of light, and—Talk to her a bit, colonel, and see if your eloquence can't faze her!" breaking off abruptly as he caught a faint signal which he recognized.

That was not the worst, either. His messenger had returned, but alone! And his hurried whisper blasted that one hope, at least.

"The critter's sloped, boss! He started over this way, Dick says, an' I reckon he must 'a glimpsed yen' critter, fer I found his trail jest yender, an' he was takin' steps more'n a rod long!"

A laugh from the rear caused Maverick Mark to wheel swiftly. He saw Carlita sitting up, a smile upon her swarthy face as she asked:

"Is your proof ready, senor? Truly, I am waxing impatient!"

"You ask for proof, Black Jaguar?" he laughed, drawing closer. "All right! Proof shall be yours, by the wagon-load! What better proof can you ask for than the recognition of their dam by her cubs?"

"I am Spanish, senor, not an accursed Tejana."

"Then you can't comprehend my meaning, of course, which ought to be quite consoling. And you will act all the more naturally if you don't know we are guiding you direct to the den of the Black Jaguar. If they kill you as an im-

postor—as they surely will if you are not the genuine article—you are innocent as an angel, but if they welcome you as their dam—well, that's enough proof for any hog!"

CHAPTER XXX.

HOW MAVERICK MARK REASONED.

MAVERICK MARK glibly rattled off those sentences in his own tongue, like one not only convinced that he was right, but one who cared little whether his full meaning was understood or not.

Yet even that crucial test failed. Not a shade of change came into that face or those eyes. If she had been really ignorant of the language, Carlita Quesado could not have shown less emotion.

She began to protest, however, when Maverick Mark tightened her bonds, adding several turns of a stout lasso to make all secure, but he paid no heed to her words. Since she was firm in persisting her innocence and complete ignorance, he would play his own part as thoroughly.

Picking her up by the shoulders, a cowboy took her heels at his nod, and they bore the captive between them some little distance into the chaparral, there quite dense, though penetrable, thanks to the many trails made by wandering beasts.

"Looks like playing it tolerably low down on a good man, Dan, to set him as an armed guard over a woman, don't it?" laughed Maverick, when their camp was gained and the Black Jaguar was placed in a fairly comfortable position in the shade.

"Oh, I ain't kickin', Maverick, ef you say it's a man's job."

"It is a man's job, old fellow, and if you knew as much as I do about the Black Jaguar, you'd say the same thing. Watch her close. Don't let anything call your attention from her, until I come back to relieve you. She's slippery as a snake, and never rattler carried as deadly poison!"

"Waal, ef she gits 'way with my baggage, I want to know!"

"If she gets even the ghost of a chance, Dan, you'll know—on the other side of the range, maybe, not in this life. But I reckon you can hold her level, if any one man can."

"I'm open to try it on, anyhow."

"She's heap sight more valuable living than dead, of course, and I'd give a hand rather than lose her in either shape. Of course we'll be on guard, and it's hardly possible that any of her cubs can steal in upon us. Still, such things have happened, and if such should be the case now, remember that she's your meat! If you can't hold her living, kill her as though she was just what her rig-out claims."

"You bet I will!"

Satisfied that he had said sufficient to keep a vigilant pair of eyes upon the prisoner, Maverick Mark withdrew, joining Colonel Cannon, who had held aloof in obedience to a signal received.

Seeking a spot where they might talk with comfort, Maverick Mark motioned his companion to sit down, setting an example himself. And as he filled a pipe, he slowly asked:

"Of course you recognized her as the Black Jaguar, colonel?"

"Could I doubt my eyes?" almost viciously. "Surely I had time and cause enough to learn every line and every feature of that accursed face! Know her? I surely did and do!"

"It's just as well to smooth the path as we come to it, colonel," coolly nodded the Man from Nowhere. "We'll have time enough to talk matters over a bit, before the boys get back with the Greaser."

"What made him run away, all of a sudden?"

"Dan hit it off right, I reckon, when he said it was because he sighted the Black Jaguar."

"But—he had already offered to sell her out!"

"That's one thing, and this is another. A cur like Diego might sell a secret of one like the Black Jaguar, so long as he believed she would never find it out; but facing her while proclaiming himself a traitor, is a horse of another color. So—he cut the gordian knot by cutting it himself. See?"

"That it leaves us in a nasty scrap!" nodded the colonel, gloomily. "We can't force her into acting as guide."

"Not easily, I admit, but if it has to come that way, I reckon I can manage to bring truth to even her lips. Still, I'd hate to trust her, even while feeling that she has told the whole truth. And it's just in the papers that we needn't waste any more coaxing on the obstinate old wretch, after all!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, even while my tongue was rattling on so lively to the fine old lady, my brain was doing a bit of figuring on its own account. And while we're waiting for the boys to come, suppose you and I do a little reasoning on our own hook, colonel."

"I can think only of that fiend!" stifling a vicious curse. "If you'd give me full swing, I'd wrench the whole truth from her vile lips, or kill her trying!"

"That's just about the size of it, colonel. You'd have to kill her. And then you'd be feel-

ing fit to turn on me for not holding back your hands. Can't you see?"

"Nothing but—curse it, man!" with fierce agony of mind. "Do something more than chatter! Save my—it'll wear me out yet!"

"I've already sworn to save both your son and your ward, colonel," was the grave, soothing response. "I've brought you and the boys in safety this far; and that's further by a good many miles than ever an armed force from our side of the Grande penetrated without having to burn powder and shed blood."

"I know. I admit it all. I'm worse than a fool, Mark. But—I'm eating my very heart out with anxiety each hour of the day!"

"I can feel for you, colonel, and I'm doing my level best to not only keep my promise, but to keep you from thinking too deeply. If I fall short in the last, I'm mighty sorry, but I can't help it."

"I know. Some day I'll try to thank you, Mark. But just now—"

"You're here to listen while I reason a bit," lightly interposed the Man from Nowhere.

"But if you keep eating up all the wind, how can I get enough to keep my bellows working? Try and button up, I beg!"

"Go on. I'll not say a word until you ask me to speak."

"That's hearty! And so—give me room to unfold my brain in, and I'll fairly amaze you, colonel! If I don't— But business, now!"

"First, we roped a Greaser, who preferred life, liberty and gold to going up a tree or playing anise-seed bag at the tail of a lively horse! And, to make the two sides balance, he spun a long yarn about the Black Jaguar, her cubs, her den, and the best method of finding its mouth."

"Being a Greaser, of course one had to guard against too many lies, but, being a Greaser, again, one could count more surely on getting at least part truth, through fear of death."

"Well, so far as tested, Diego appears to be posted in these parts. He proved himself a good guide, as far as we've tested his knowledge. I say that twice over, so you'll know I fully mean it, colonel," with a light laugh as Cannon gave a move of uneasiness.

"Next thing we roped a woman both you and I stand ready to swear is none other than the Black Jaguar. I send after Diego, to face her down, but Diego has skipped. Why? Because he glimpsed the hag, and feared her claws, even when clipped."

"Now, while questioning Diego on various points, I took the trouble to note them down in pencil on paper. I hardly expected ever to use them, but I wanted a check against possible lying on his part. Now the fellow has skipped, I can find the Jaguar's den by following those very notes!"

"Unless he was lying to you," muttered the colonel.

"If he had been lying up to date, what was to hinder him from lying still longer? If he did not recognize the Black Jaguar in our captive, why flee? If he had been leading us astray, wouldn't he have stuck it out, watching his chance to free the woman he had been lying to benefit? I think so, and there you have my way of reasoning, colonel. What do you think of it?"

Although favorably impressed, Colonel Cannon was far from convinced that all was working so smoothly, and he put question after question as point after point occurred to his busy brain, keeping Maverick Mark busy meeting each objection in turn.

Little by little he was won over to the same way of thinking, however, and by the time his stock of objections was exhausted Colonel Cannon felt more at ease in his heart than he had been at any time since the Black Jaguar halted in front of Hand-off Ranch.

By his notes Maverick Mark showed that they could get on without a guide, always supposing Diego had been faithful to his bargain up to capture of Carlita Quesado.

By making the best possible use of the information he had gleaned they might reach the front of the den to which, almost certainly, their friends had been conveyed. If not there, surely the truth could be wrung from the lips of some of the Rustlers, if they made it a point to secure a few prisoners.

Since nothing could be done until the cowboys returned from their search for Diego, the two men went back to where the Black Jaguar was kept under guard, the colonel trying in vain to wrest the truth from her lips. As for Maverick Mark, he had abandoned that hope long ago.

He was smoking lazily, when a hasty footstep warned him of news, and springing erect he met the cowboy who came panting up, his face all in a glow, his eyes plainly proclaiming important tidings.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PRAYING FOR DEFEAT.

WITH vicious distinctness Don Melchoir Gayferos pronounced each word, doing his level best to drive conviction home to the heart of the girl whom he had—and not so many days before—once tried still harder to make love him as a future husband.

Despite her natural courage, braced now by her intense hatred for this drunken bully, Lota Quesado could not quite keep from shrinking back as he made that truly astounding declaration. It could not possibly be true! Yet—would even he dare call on Pablo Acosta to prove his words, if a lie?

"Does the truth bite so sharply, poor Lota?" mocked the villain, his laugh belying his commiserating tones. "Does the warning come too late? Hath the whelp of the blind spaniel already won his way to that innocent virgin heart?"

He might have said more, but for the stinging pain which shot through his lips, just then. True, 'twas only a woman's hand, but his taunts had driven her to desperation, and the only marvel is that Lota Quesado did not use lead or steel instead.

Smiting his lips with a blow that sent his head jerking back, Lota brushed past the Rustler, until the way to camp was open before her. But as she caught sight of Pablo Acosta slowly walking toward the log cabin in which the two captives had recently been placed, she turned abruptly to the left, unheeding if she heard the jeering words which Don Melchoir sent after her.

"Yonder goes Pablo, my precious! Shall I call him to decide between us? Shall I beg him to say which is more nearly right: Carlita Quesado's tongue, or her daughter's heart?"

At another time Lota might give thought to paying off those debts, but just now she thought only of escaping from that detested presence, that loathed voice, those mocking eyes. And like a wounded wild animal, she fled from observation, seeking solitude.

She paid no attention to her steps, and only paused when a sharp, stern challenge barred the way.

"Halt! Sorry, Señorita Lota, but our new chief has withdrawn all passwords, and I cannot permit you to go by."

At that first word Lota had paused, flashing a bewildered glance around, only then recognizing whither she had fled: high up a narrow pass back of the Rustlers' Den.

"You mean Don Melchoir, Agatone?"

"Yes, s'ñorita. There is to be a new order of things, he says. It is well, of course, else the most noble chief would not— Pardon old Agatone, s'ñori a, for—"

Lota had turned and was rapidly retracing her steps, and if the man on guard completed his garrulous explanation, she never caught the ending.

Still, she was not ready to seek Pablo Acosta, though her brain was beginning to clear, and that dazed, benumbed sensation to leave her senses.

What was it Don Melchoir had said? That Eugene Cannon was her own brother? As though— Why, the drunken knave must be crazy!

That would make him own child to Carlita Quesado, who hated him so intensely that she had risked her life in order to effect his capture! If her brother, Carlita must be his mother! Or—

Lota actually laughed at that wildly-improbable idea. If Eugene was not Carlita's son, then she, Lota, must be daughter to Colonel Creed Cannon!

"He was lying! He knew not the words that came from his drunken tongue! I am worse than a little idiot for giving his maunderings a second thought. But—"

She could not help it. And the very pain she felt while trying did more to open her eyes to the truth than days of ordinary experience might have done.

It was not love that she felt for yonder handsome stranger. Not love such as Don Melchoir so brutally hinted at. And yet—why had her heart almost ceased its throbbing at sight of his peril in those few seconds before Pablo—true, noble-hearted Pablo!—jerked upward the weapon which menaced Eugene Cannon with death? Why had it been so difficult for her arms to loose his neck a little later? Why should her heart leap and flutter so wildly, even now, at the bare thought of that embrace?

Of course it could not be love. He had never uttered the word in all the talks they had had together since reaching the Jaguar's Den.

True, there had at times been a glow in his eyes—she could not recall another pair of eyes so clear, so honest, so full of—

And so the little woman tried to fight it out with herself, each minute clearing up some things, only to leave others still deeper in obscurity. She suffered enough during that hour to satisfy the anger and spite of Don Melchoir, but he might not have felt so pleased with himself if he could have seen just what sort of light it was that finally dawned upon Lota's heart.

Her unusually pale face partly betrayed the suffering she had undergone when Lota finally made her way back to camp, looking around for Pablo Acosta.

She sighted him, reclining at ease beneath one of the trees which helped render that valley so lovely as well as comfortable, and as she could see nothing of Don Melchoir, she passed over to where the deposed commander was resting.

Pablo rose at sound of her footfalls, bowing respectfully, a glint of something like love entering his dark eyes. There was precious little sentiment in his composition, but what there was awoke at the touch of Carlita Quesado and Lota, her daughter.

"I can serve you, little one?" he asked, reading something of the trouble in her pale face. "Has any person given you trouble? If so, tell old Pablo, and 'twill be a black hour for the dog! Carlita, our queen, never sent an order for Pablo Acosta to stand with folded hands while her child was being wronged!"

"Am I really her child, Pablo?" impulsively asked Lota, her hands clasping his arm, her eyes gazing keenly into his dark visage.

"Who dares even hint the contrary, Lota?"

"Then, how can I be sister to the captive Señor, Pablo?"

That sentence went home. Acosta not only changed color, but his herculean form shrunk back, recoiling as from a sickening blow.

Lota saw this, and her lids closed for an instant, all around her seeming to grow unstable, her own brain giving a dizzy whirl. Could it be true? Had Don Melchoir spoken no more than the truth? And yet—

"Say 'tis a foul lie, Pablo Acosta!" she panted, too deeply shaken to consider how wholly she might be betraying the secret she had so recently learned. "Tell me he lied! That stranger is not my brother?"

"Who told you he was your brother, Lota?" asked Acosta, rallying from the shock her words had given him. "Wait," taking her hand and gently forcing her to a seat under the tree, sinking down in front of her, so that his broad shoulders formed a perfect screen against curious eyes, should such be turned in that direction. "Speak no more, my little queen, until thy heart ceases its wild flutterings."

Lota obeyed, for already she was feeling uneasy, lest she had permitted her tongue to lead her too fast, if not too far. She had promised herself she would act warily, sounding each step before fully committing herself to taking it. By so acting, using her eyes as well as her tongue, she might surprise the truth before Pablo could fairly realize what she was angling for.

It might be too late for that now, yet she could form no other plan so quickly, and so—

"What does mother intend doing with the prisoners, Pablo?"

"Has she not told you, little queen?" slowly asked the giant, in turn.

"She has told me nothing, Pablo, but—"

"Then why should you think old Pablo deeper into her confidence, little queen? What Carlita Quesado kept secret from her daughter, she surely would not confide to a servant!"

"You are her brother, Pablo, and her true friend, never a servant."

"My mother was her mother's servant. I am servant to your mother, little queen. If she calls me friend, 'tis only through her greatness of heart."

"But you do know what mother means to do with her captives, Pablo," persisted Lota, half-impatiently.

"If I know, and you are ignorant on that point, little queen, 'tis your mother's secret I am holding in trust. How, then, can you expect me to betray what my queen wishes kept secret?"

Lota was silent. When the giant Rustler assumed that tone and manner, past experience told her he was not to be moved by words alone. And then she was not nearly so anxious on that point as the other.

It was hard work to bring it forward again, but Lota proved equal to the occasion. She could not go on in doubt, and even the truth would be no worse than what she was already suffering.

"If you will not tell me that, Pablo, surely you cannot decline to answer what I asked you at first: is yonder stranger really any kin of mine?"

"Who put such wild fancies into thy busy brain, little queen?" the giant asked, frowning darkly, his eyes evading her intent gaze.

"That will come later, Pablo. Answer me! Is yonder captive any relationship to me?"

"You mean the fair Tejano, little one?"

"I mean the handsome Tejano, Pablo, and right well you know it!" her little fist striking his muscular arm impatiently. "Tell me! Is it possible for he and I to be brother and sister?"

Acosta shifted his position uneasily. He plainly disliked to give a positive reply, one way or the other, yet he did not see how he was to escape.

"The priests tell us all things are possible, Lota, but—"

"I am asking you, not the priests, Pablo! For the last time: am I sister to that Tejano?"

"Wait. You are too troubled in mind for sober talk, my little angel. Before I answer thee, tell me who dared hint at such kindred?"

"Don Melchoir Gayferos, hardly an hour since! He swore that mother bade him warn me against looking too much on the handsome stranger. He swore she told him we were brother and sister!"

"Don Melchoir Gayferos told you all this?"

"And much more! With the rest he bade me ask you if his words were not simple truth. He bade me summon him to face you down if you dared deny his perfect truth. I told him he lied like a cur, Pablo!"

"That is easier to believe than the other, at all events!" the big fellow said, with a hard, irritable laugh.

"Then he *did* lie, Pablo?" eagerly panted Lota, clasping his arm, her great blue eyes eloquently seconding her tongue. "Say that he lied, and I will love you better than ever, if that can be!"

But the assurance she so dearly wished, failed to come. Pablo turned his head away until his dark face was hidden from her eyes. And he paid no immediate attention to her almost fierce shaking of his arm.

"Speak, I command thee!" she flashed, at length. "Say that he lies, or I will rank you with him—black-hearted, treacherous, too foul for living in this fair world!"

"Don Melchoir declared plainly that Carlita Quesado, your mother and my queen, bade him tell you all this, Lota?" slowly asked Acosta, once more confronting that passionate face.

"So his vile lips said, but I could not believe the words that passed them! Say that he lied, Pablo!"

"So I would, little lady, if so saying would not be giving the lie to Carlita Quesado as well."

"Then—you dare not deny it?"

"I dare not deny what my queen may state, Lota."

"And I am his own sister? How can that be, when my mother so bitterly hates his father?"

"If an explanation be possible, Lota, that mother must give it. I dare not say more, until my queen speaks. Hist! Don Melchoir is coming this way, child! Dry thy tears, or hide thy face. Never let him see how deeply he hath stung thee!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BOTH, OR NEITHER.

WITH that hastily-whispered warning, Pablo Acosta sprang to his feet and advanced to meet Don Melchoir, who was but a short distance away when first discovered.

There had been a peculiar smile playing upon his face as he watched the twain, but it vanished as the giant sprang up. His hands were resting easily near his waist, and though he did not alter their positions, they were ready to grasp and draw a weapon on the instant, if the occasion should arise.

But Pablo Acosta showed no signs of wishing a quarrel. In cold but perfectly respectful tones, he asked:

"Can I serve you in any way, commandante?"

"If you will," bowed Gayferos, smiling faintly. "I find that I am poorly fitted to take charge of the company, just now, Señor Acosta. I have been drinking too heavily, to my shame be it admitted! And so—May I beg you to take command until I recover?"

"You wish me to take command of all: men, prisoners, camp, yourself, even, Don Melchoir?" slowly asked Pablo.

"Of everything, including my poor self, Señor Acosta," bowed the Rustler. "And if you find me refusing to do whatever duty you see fit to assign me, and illness is not sufficient excuse in your judgment, punish me as my fault deserves."

Lota heard this much, but she did not wait for more. Fearing to meet those evil eyes, just then, lest her own betray more than she wished Don Melchoir to note, she left the tree and passed back under deeper cover.

Once more alone with her thoughts, Lota lay down where she was not likely to be found, even if sought for, trying to think, to reason, to make all that ugly tangle straighten itself out.

She could not solve that one great point, however, and the more she tried, the more impossible it seemed that she could be sister to Eugene Cannon. And yet—if true, Pablo Acosta surely would know it! And if false, why did he not join with her in denouncing Don Melchoir as an arrant liar?

"Why did Pablo salute the dog so respectfully, bowing as a slave before his master? Why did he seem willing to accept the charge?"

Lota broke off with a sharp, painful gasp. Why did Don Melchoir wish to resign the position for which he had fought so vigorously, only a few short hours earlier in the day?

Like a revelation of light, the terrible truth flashed upon her excited brain. It seemed preposterous, yet she never once doubted the perfect truth of that conviction.

Don Melchoir hated the young Texan who had shamed him before the eyes of all the band. He dared not do him harm, while in charge of all, even though he might do the deed and escape unseen by any. For, since he was in command, Carlita Quesado would surely hold him responsible for the safe-keeping of her highly-valued captives.

It was already growing dusk when Lota reached this point in her reasonings, and when she arose and went back to where the band

were engaged in their usual occupations, she learned from casual talk going on around her that Pablo Acosta was once more in full command, while Don Melchoir, probably called away on pressing business, had mounted a fresh horse and ridden out of the valley!

This only served to confirm her ugly suspicions, and from that moment Lota was firm in her resolve to foil the Rustler, let the cost to herself be what it might.

She ate her supper as usual, showing no trace of the anxiety which really filled brain and heart to overflowing. She said very little to Pablo Acosta, who shared her meal, and in that little she never once touched upon the subject uppermost in her mind.

The strange manner in which the tall Rustler had acted that afternoon had seriously impaired her confidence in his truth and honesty. She did not go so far as to accuse him, mentally, of being in league with Don Melchoir, but she dared not trust him with her suspicions, much less with the desperate resolution which was growing firmer with each minute that crept so slowly along.

"I will take food to the prisoners, Pablo," she said, quietly, when their meal came to an end.

Acosta looked keenly into her face as she moved about, gathering the choicest bits of food for that purpose, frowning like one ill at ease. Then, in slow, almost timid tones, he spoke:

"You will not speak to the Tejano of what we were discussing, little queen?"

"Why should I?" squarely meeting that uneasy gaze. "I do not believe 'tis true. I will not believe we are of the same blood, until my mother declares as much before my eyes. Until then, Pablo, let it be as though it had never been."

"So be it, my little queen!" with a long breath of relief. "I can trust you, Lota, so—"

"If you doubt, why not bear me company?" coldly interposed the maiden, but turning away with the food supply without waiting for his refusal or acceptance.

She never cast a glance backward, though trembling inwardly lest Pablo take her at her word and follow after. If he did this, time must be wasted, and with Don Melchoir afoot, time was very precious just then!

There was a sentinel before the door of the log hut, but he opened the way promptly, and Lota entered—to start back with a low gasp as she found Eloise the only other inmate of the one room.

"I forgot to tell you, Lota," said Pablo, pausing at the threshold, "that Don Melchoir ordered the prisoners confined in different huts. Give me the young man's share of food, and I will take it to him while you attend to this señorita."

In silence Lota complied, but having set Eloise's hands at liberty so that she could feed herself, she hastily left the cabin, just in time to note whither Pablo went. She stole up to the hut, caught the sound of both voices, then hurried away, her plans changed in some degree by this unexpected change of quarters.

She bade her especial servant saddle and bridle her horse for the road, bidding him tell Pablo Acosta that she had gone to seek her mother, if the giant asked any questions, then rode swiftly away from the little valley, armed and provisioned as for a long and dangerous journey.

With time passing so swiftly, and so much more to accomplish than she had anticipated, she dared not spare her horse, though on its speed and endurance a still dearer life might depend.

Leaving the valley, she circled around the rocky hills, leaving her steed, food and weapons in a safe spot, then nimbly crossing the range to enter the valley by the rear pass. This was guarded, as usual, but where orders were given to hinder strangers from passing, none were intended for friends, least of all one like the Black Jaguar's child.

Passing the guard with a plausible excuse, Lota stole directly to the place where Eugene Cannon was confined. She found little difficulty in entering the hut from the rear—that unguarded opening, but still further convincing her that Don Melchoir meant mischief—and rousing the young man without attracting notice from the sentinel, she cut his bonds, whispering him to follow, in perfect silence.

Eugene obeyed, as a matter of course. Who would not, with such a guide, and such a fate in prospective? But the instant he could do so without danger of alarming the sentry, he whispered:

"Where is Eloise, Lota? I can't go without taking her!"

"Quiet, for thy life! She is safe. Follow—in silence, I pray!"

Not until the base of the rocky hill was gained did Eugene speak again, but as Lota seemed inclined to press still further, he paused.

"Where is Eloise, Lota? Have you taken her up already?"

"Here—put on these, my friend," murmured Lota, producing a hat and *serape* similar to

those usually worn by Don Melchoir. "Pull the hat down to shade thy eyes—so!"

"Where is Eloise, I ask you, Lota?" a suspicion of truth flashing across his brain at last. "I'll never run away and leave her behind to pay the penalty! It's both or neither, with me, my dear girl!"

"Come!" stamping her foot impatiently. "You know not what frightful perils menace thee! Come, I say, or 'twill forever be too late!"

"Not without taking Eloise with me, I say, for the last time," resolutely declared the young rancher. "You'd scorn me for being such a cur, Lota, when you had time to think it all over. And—I'd hate that, little girl! Hate it even more than I fear death!"

"She is safe—your sister, señor," with enforced calmness, though her heart was throbbing painfully. "She is in no danger, while you—if you escape not this night, señor, you will never live to see the sun rise in the morning!"

"Then I'll have to lose that sight, Lota, for I'll never run away and leave a woman behind to pay for my cowardice."

"But you *must* go, señor," stamping her foot passionately. "You must go—or die!"

"All right. Die it is, then, for I'll never go without Eloise!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TRUE-HEARTED TRAITRESS.

As those words passed his lips, Eugene Cannon turned as though he considered the matter settled, and that nothing remained for him but to go back to his place of imprisonment, or put all to the test by attacking the armed guard before the log cabin in which Eloise was confined.

"Art thou mad, señor?" panted Lota, her trembling hand seeking to restrain him.

"I'd be worse than mad, Lota, were I to slink away from danger, leaving a helpless girl behind to bear the brunt."

"Would I ask it, unless I knew that setting her free was impossible? And even if set at liberty, how could she bear up against what lies in front? How endure the suffering and hardship you must undergo before you can feel that safety lies near? She would die long before your own country was reached!"

"Better that, than die of shame at thought of one whom she has called cousin proving himself a cur," frowned the young rancher, wishing that friendly dispute well over, yet unable to cut it short himself.

Despite their perilous surroundings, he found it very pleasant to look at and listen to this little woman.

Her tones were so very earnest, her touch so warm, so full of life, yet so timidly shrinking. And her face—what he could make out by that obscure light—was so lovely that—

"If she is a true woman, señor, she will blame you bitterly for not escaping when the way lay open to your feet," quickly said Lota, growing more and more earnest as time passed on and brought peril still nearer them both. "She would bid you go, that you might the sooner come back with men enough at your side to save her as well."

"That would go hard with your—with these people, Lota," hesitated the young rancher. "Surely you would not turn against them?"

"Why not, if they are acting wickedly? Why not, when—Oh, señor, I implore you to hasten. You cannot fully realize what deadly peril menaces you, else you would not linger here when any moment may bring discovery! I pray you, señor, come with me!"

Her hands were clinging to an arm, trying to draw him up the pass. And then, acting on impulse, Eugene clasped her in his arms, holding her trembling figure close to his breast, gazing into those almost luminous eyes as he muttered:

"I'd like nothing better than to go with you, Lota, even to the world's end, but—not to have you blush with shame when your brain grew calmer. Not to have you think, if you did not call me, a coward! I can't go without taking Eloise along."

"You can—you must!" earnestly replied the maiden, for a single breath yielding to that ardent embrace, but then slipping away with an eel-like suppleness. "I swear by all the saints that no harm shall come to the señorita. I can and will guard her from all harm, all insult, until you can find means to procure her liberty. But you—that is different, señor."

"I'm glad you begin to see it in that light, little lady," Eugene said, with a low, mirthless laugh. "And so—Shall I crawl back into my cell, Lota, or shall I try to set Eloise free?"

"Neither one nor the other. Oh, señor, why will you not understand? Why will you hang back when nothing save rapid movement can save your life? Why will you—Do you know why that villain caused you to be given separate places of confinement, señor?"

"Not unless it was to show his authority, and at the same time make it a little more disagreeable for us both."

"Worse, far worse, señor! You know not how bitterly Melchoir Gayferos can hate! You

know not how terrible he is when blind rage drives him to desperation! You cannot even dream—Señor, why was that hole in the rear of your hut left open?"

"For an angel to visit me, Lota."

"The angel of death, then!" evading his clasp, but remaining so near that there could be little risk of her tones reaching other and less friendly ears. "Why did Don Melchoir resign command, almost as soon as he had proved his right to take charge of all? Why did he ride away from this valley, so shortly after returning from a long journey? Why all this, unless to pave the way for revenge?"

"Then you really think—" hesitated the young rancher, impressed by her intense earnestness.

"That Don Melchoir means to steal back this night, and let morning find one of my mother's prisoners a corpse, when the dawn of day gives light enough!"

"He would be one of the very first suspected, don't you see?"

"What matter, so long as positive proof was lacking? And he has prepared for all that! He resigns command to Pablo Acosta. He rides away, to be absent who knows how long? He steals back unseen; the only being who could declare his presence in the Den this night is forever silent! Then—why will you hold back, señor, when I offer you life and liberty?"

"If I could take Eloise along," hesitated the young rancher, giving far more thought to his father's ward than to his father's son.

"But you cannot, señor. The sentry before her door is one whom even I dare not offer to bribe or tempt. The cabin is strong, and long before we could open a way—even if the noise did not betray us to watchful ears—dawn would come, or Don Melchoir spring his deadly trap!"

"Well, if he didn't find me inside its jaws?" laughing lightly at the fancy.

"He would rouse the band, and that would be fatal; to me, even as to you, señor!"

"To me, perhaps, but not to you. Even that vile cur would not dare harm you, Lota."

"He would, or some of his followers. They would have to, for I'd never yield while I could shoot or strike!"

"And all for me, Lota?"

"All for you, señor," bravely meeting his keen gaze.

That was hardly the right moment for love-making, but Eugene never gave a thought to their surroundings as he caught the maiden in his arms, pressing lips to lips with an ardor which might surprise himself when he came to reflect, but which seemed entirely natural just then. Entirely natural, and, oh! so sweetly intoxicating!

Lota yielded to that embrace, and if she did not answer back, her red lips never turned away until Eugene had to break that sweet contact to catch his own breath. And then, still lying upon his breast, Lota murmured:

"You will go with me, señor? You will grant my prayer? You will not force me to witness your death, even to meet my own?"

"I'll go with you, darling, but—why not tell Pablo? He surely would see that the vile schemes of you cur came to naught?"

"He might save you from Gayferos, but not—not from my mother!"

Once more Lota slipped from those arms, and once more Eugene Cannon stood irresolute. Life seemed dearer than ever to him now, but how could he run away and leave Eloise to bear the brunt?

"If I have cause to fear harm from your mother, Lota, Eloise must be equally endangered. Can't you see, my angel? It really *must* be both or neither!"

"I swear that no harm shall come to the señorita. Can you not trust my oath, señor?" reproachfully asked the maiden.

"Against all the world, Lota, but—"

"Then not another instant must be lost!" her eager hands adjusting the disguise her forethought had provided for that purpose. "Bear in mind that you are none other than Don Melchoir Gayferos, señor! And you are in anything but a good humor! Your voice is gruff and harsh, your manner imperious. You pause not for an answer when you bid old Agatone keep close watch and ward over the mountain pass. You comprehend, señor?"

"If it's got to beso," rather moodily muttered the young rancher, already regretting that hasty promise. "If you'll not let me off, Lota, I'll do the best I know how."

"I hold you to your promise, señor! Now—try to imitate the voice of Don Melchoir, but be sure and act gruffly; in an ill-humor, Don Melchoir might pass old Agatone in the guise of aught from angel to devil, without being halted for reasons!"

"So much the better for—old Agatone!" grimly muttered the young rancher, now that he had actually consented to escape, beginning to feel that he could fight for freedom if called upon.

"But, fortunately, Lota had judged the pass guard aright. He gave a low challenge in due order, of course, but when the gruff tones of Don Melchoir bade him stand aside and be silent, he meekly obeyed, congratulating himself on receiving no worse, as that shrouded shape

passed by his station, quickly fading from his sight.

"The saints are smiling upon us, señor!" murmured Lota, drawing a full, grateful breath as they fairly gained the top of the range without opposition, without a sound from the camp below that could give them uneasiness. "I feared too much time had been lost, but now—since Don Melchoir has not attempted to strike his foul blow, there is yet hope for us all!"

"That sentinel surely recognized you, Lota?" hesitated Eugene.

"Beyond a doubt. And since he did recognize me, señor?"

"When I am found missing, will he keep still? Will he not declare that *you* helped me past his post?"

"I think not, señor," with a low, easy laugh. "When I have bidden you God-speed, and seen you fairly off on your long and dangerous journey, I will return by this pass. I will see poor old Agatone, and tell him that I aided you to pass him by. What would you, señor?"

"Kill the fellow, so he can't do harm to you, my angel!"

"No, it must not be so!" her lithe young arms betraying an unsuspected degree of strength as they wound about his neck, holding him back.

"There is no need, for—Hearken, señor! I will tell Agatone to believe that all was a dream. Tell him to swear, if questioned, that no one passed his station this night. So—what can the rest do? He will stand firm, for his own safety, and search will be made in the opposite direction."

"But—if the truth should be discovered? Even your life might be endangered by this escape, Lota!"

"No. You forget, señor, that I am the Black Jaguar's daughter."

"I'll never believe it! She's a devil, you an angel!"

"Still, 'tis truth, señor," her voice growing sad, almost bitter, as she abruptly turned and led the way down the further slope, toward the spot where she had placed her horse in hiding.

In anything but a calm state of mind Eugene Cannon followed his fair guide, each step making him less and less satisfied with himself. It seemed cowardly, this escaping without even an attempt to set Eloise at liberty, and when he finally caught sight of the waiting horse, the young rancher was more than half-resolved to use it, not for simple flight, but to enter the valley from the open side, and rescue Eloise or once more share her captivity.

Possibly Lota suspected something of this, for, as she placed a pair of pistols in his hands, and pointed out the repeating-rifle and food secured to the saddle, she spoke seriously:

"Swear to me, señor, that you will not delay. Swear that you will ride due north, never pausing save to preserve your life in case enemies should show ahead, until you are safely across the Rio Grande and in your own country! Swear, or I'll confess myself a traitress to Pablo!"

Reluctantly Eugene passed his word, and then Lota vowed in turn to shield Eloise from all harm, and in case the Rustlers should change their camp before he could return with a rescuing force, she would leave a note of explanation at the spot where they now stood.

"And when I come, you will go back with me, Lota?" asked Eugene, his arms clasping her tightly, his lips pressing hers once more.

"If the saints so will it, señor!" she murmured, then breaking from his ardent embrace and fleeing through the night, leaving him to mount and reluctantly take his course northward.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE JAGUAR'S LEAP.

THAT was the hardest: parting with the maiden whom, against his cooler if not better judgment, Eugene Cannon had fallen over head and ears in love with. And when that parting was once a fact, the rest grew far easier.

Now that his flight had actually begun, the young rancher pressed forward at a rapid pace, resolved to make the very best of his chance.

He examined his weapons, and found them of the best. He counted the ammunition provided by Lota, and mentally thanked her for supplying him with such a generous hand.

"Enough to stand off the entire race of Mexicans!" he grimly laughed, and from that moment he cast aside all regrets, resolving to reach home or die trying.

He found provisions enough packed behind his saddle to supply his needs for several days, and before the end of that time, he would be far enough away to feel no fear in using his firearms to replenish his stock, if need be.

And as he rode along, studying the points of his mount, he once again thanked the generous girl, though he could not guess that she had given him her favorite horse.

"I'm good for fight, race or siege!" he laughed, having completed his investigations.

As yet he had caught no sounds that could denote discovery of his flight by the Rustlers, and as time passed on, carrying him far beyond

ear-range of the valley, he felt comparatively safe from pursuit even when that discovery could be no longer delayed.

"If the little lady scares old Agatone into swearing to what she said, they'll never think of hunting a trail in this direction until scouring the ground on the other side of the range. And after that—well, if they overtake me, on this nag, they deserve all they catch!"

Eugene had plenty of food for thought. If anything, entirely too much for his own good. And so it chanced that he paid little notice to his surroundings, only keeping as directly north as the natural obstacles in that line would permit.

He had slight knowledge of the lay of the country in that line, since his captors had reached the rendezvous by a wide circuit; but he knew that by keeping a general course northward, he must sooner or later reach the Rio Grande. Once across the river, he would be in perfect safety, so far as the Black Jaguar's cubs were concerned.

This, if all went well, but that was not to be.

His thoughts mainly filled with Lota, Cannon pressed forward, the night growing old and dawn coming nearer. Nothing turned up to cause him alarm, or to delay his progress, until he was passing through a tract of scattered timber and scanty chaparral.

Then, without sound or warning, just as his horse led him beneath a wide-spreading tree, that intelligent creature gave a snort of fright, leaping to one side in spite of his instinctive jerk on the rein.

Any rider would have done the same under similar circumstances, but as Eugene Cannon wrenched his frightened steed to a stand-still, it gave that lithe, dangerous animal crouching on a low limb, time to gauge its leap, and sure as a stroke of fate, the jaguar shot out and downward, striking viciously with its powerful paw as it came.

Eugene Cannon caught a glimpse of the dark shape, just in time to throw his body far back in the saddle, jerking sharply on the curb-bit. He saved his own person, but at the expense of his horse, and both went down together before that heavy shock.

It all happened so swiftly that Eugene had not time to free his feet from the stirrups, and, in falling, one foot and leg was caught beneath the death-stricken horse, pinning him to the ground, while the fall partially stunned him.

There was a savage roar, a brief struggle, then that hungry muzzle was buried in the quivering throat of the poor horse.

Not for long. Cannon rapidly recovered his senses, and hearing that dull, ominous, purring sound, caught at a revolver on the hip that lay uppermost, jerking it forth from the holster as an ugly head raised up, with yellow eyes blazing viciously, hot breath, laden with the sickening scent of fresh blood, steaming full into his face.

It was more instinct than reason that led to his shoving the pistol forward until muzzle almost touched muzzle, working the weapon as swiftly as he could make the hammer rise and fall.

Fortunately, it was a self-acting weapon, and though the first shot sent that head back with a wild yell, two other bullets found their mark before the jaguar reared up and fell backward, howling and tearing the hard ground up in great clouds in its death-agony.

And desperately wrenching his leg free, Cannon reeled away until his limb failed him, and he fell, his brain whirling, his senses fairly deserting him.

It was broad day when Cannon revived sufficiently to lift his head and gaze bewilderedly around him.

For some little time he could not recall what had taken place, nor where he might be. Not until he noted the body of his horse, and just beyond it, the form of a huge jaguar stretched out in death, did the truth flash upon him.

He sprang to his feet, giving a hoarse cry as one leg gave way beneath him, causing him to fall at full length. In dull terror he lifted his head far enough to stare at his crippled member. Crippled it surely was, though he could see no blood or sign of open wound.

He raised still higher, gaining a sitting posture, then felt of his leg and foot. His trousers were torn, his leg swollen so that his boot fitted from calf to toe like a second skin. And then, as he realized the full extent of his misfortune, a groan broke from his dry lips.

For a few moments he gave way to despair, for while he realized how much depended upon his speedily reaching home and setting his friends on the right trail, he knew that he was crippled, that at the very best he could only hobble along with cane or crutch. And so many weary miles lay between that spot and Texas!

But then his true grit showed itself, and, with the keen knife which Lota Quesado had provided him, Eugene cut the boot from his foot, saving the sole for a sandal in case of need. As the blood rushed into the swollen member, the pain drew a groan from his lips, but then, summoning all his native pluck, he dragged himself across to where his horse lay.

He had hardly dared hope, but still it was a bitter disappointment to him when he found the poor creature already stiff and cooling. Its neck had been broken by that terrific blow, and it must have been dead even before those cruel fangs tore open its throat to drink its blood.

So was the jaguar dead, its skull shattered, its throat showing another bullet-hole. And as Eugene noted its length, its bared fangs, its mighty paws, he began to feel thankful for at least one mercy. Not once in another hundred times could he expect to escape death in the same manner, when once it drew so nigh to him.

With his knife he cut a stout limb for a crutch, doggedly resolved to press north as long as possible. He secured his provisions, drinking sparingly from the leather water-bottle, fastening them, together with his rifle, upon his shoulders. Then, barely touching the ground with his injured foot, he left that unlucky spot.

He felt sick and faint, his foot and leg paining him severely, but he dared not linger there. If the enemy should strike his trail, as they certainly must, sooner or later, they would know he could not go far after they found his dead horse. And there he saw no chance for making anything like a prolonged fight.

"I must find cover! I must find a spot where I can make 'em pay a long price for my life!" he muttered, while doggedly pressing ahead.

If his foot should get better—and he believed no bones were broken—all might yet be well, provided he could lie in hiding so long. And, with his eyes roving about on all sides, Eugene Cannon kept on for more than two hours.

At the expiration of that time he noticed a ruined building in a tolerably wide clearing, and feeling sorely in need of rest, if not of sleep, he hastened toward that refuge.

It had apparently at one time been a building well adapted to defense against dreaded enemies, but now time and fire had nearly completed its demolition.

At one end what appeared to be a substantial watch-tower, rising full two stories, still stood in fair preservation; and as Eugene noted the projecting beams of heavy timber, forming, with the roof of the lower building, a rude sort of niche, shielded in part by vines, he believed he had found a tolerably secure hiding-place.

At all events, he could go no further without rest, and entering the ruins, crawling on hands and knees for the last few rods, in order to leave as little trace as possible, he contrived to climb up into the tower by using the ends of broken timbers with which the stair had doubtless been shaped.

He looked through a narrow window at one side and saw that it would be possible for a clear-headed man to reach that vine-shaded nook by clinging to the cracked wall. But he was feeling too weak and ill to make the venture just then, and, lying down to rest, almost before he closed his weary lids he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CAUGHT IN A TRAP.

THAT sleep was broken by a harsh cry or sound of some sort, Eugene Cannon was not prepared to say just which. All he knew in those first few seconds of breathless listening, was that his slumbers had been broken, and his senses put on the keen alert by one of those strange instincts so frequently recorded.

That instinct told him danger menaced, and warned him against uttering a sound or moving a limb before he fully realized what had taken place during his nap.

He disobeyed that instinct so far as silently moving a hand to grip the revolver at his hip, but then he lay without motion, fairly holding his breath lest that faint sound hinder his strained ears.

Almost immediately there came a shout from outside the ruins, and Eugene distinguished the words, in Spanish:

"What is it, captain?"

"Come hither, I say! The trail is lost, and further searching is casting good time after bad!" cried a voice from almost directly beneath where Cannon was lying in hiding.

And that voice he instantly recognized as belonging to Don Melchoir Gayferos!

His first and most natural thought was that the enemy had trailed him to the ruins, and his teeth grated together in desperation as he resolved to make a good fight against death or recapture. But then—if this was truth, would Don Melchoir be giving him such a chance? If run to earth, would he not strike swift and sure?

"We can find naught, captain," said that voice from without, now sounding more clearly than before. "There is no trail. The Texan must have changed into a crow, to wing his flight through the air!"

"Or Satan lent him wings!" growled Gayferos, with a stinging oath. "I thought sure we had him, here, but—never a sign! And now—full four-and-twenty of us!—we have to admit shameful defeat by a cursed Texan whelp!"

In minor notes came echoes to the curses so liberally spat forth by Don Melchoir, Gayferos, and Eugene smiled grimly as he listened.

He laid just as he had lain when so abruptly aroused. He knew that by creeping along a few feet it might be possible for him to obtain a glimpse of his enemies, but he knew, too, that such an attempt on his part might lead to his own discovery.

It really seemed far too good luck to hope for, for it actually seemed as though his attempt to blind his trail had been successful, and that the Rustlers had no idea of his being so near them.

"H'la! Don Melchoir!" came a new voice, as though its owner had just reached the ruins after a sharp run.

"Out with it, Diego! You have found the devil?" roared Gayferos.

"Possibly the devil's trail, captain!"

"What sort of trail? Where? How? Out with it, Diego!"

"Over yonder, left by a horse. The first tracks I noted seemed to have been made by a grazing animal, but, then, all at once, the trail led straight away, as the crow flies!"

"In which direction?"

"Due north, captain."

"Was ever there seen such foul luck?" fairly howled Don Melchoir, apparently in a mad dance of angry disgust. "We find a dead horse, a cripple's tail, and we laugh with joy to think how quickly the good ending has come! We follow this far, then—*pouf!* Satan brushes over the trail, and our eyes are blind as moles! Then this—Diego, thou bat of ill-omen!"

"Am I to blame, captain?" in a whining tone. "I hastened hither to report, and I am ready to take up the trail and follow, though it lead direct through Tophet! Can I say or do more, captain?"

"Forgive, good Diego! Harsh words come easily from an empty stomach, and mine—Will you never have the fire started Anton?"

"Tis ready, Don Melchoir," came a croaking tone.

"Good! but hasten. We'll eat a little, then strike the trail Diego found, and if 'tis a true one—"

"The horse bore a rider, captain, that I can make oath!"

"And had been grazing at will, like an estray?"

"So the trail declared, captain."

"Then that rider can be none other than our game. Good! Satan has played his last trick, and Satan's whelp shall feel my grip before the moon rises above the chaparral! I vow it! I, Don Melchoir Gayferos!"

Not a word of all this was permitted to escape the eager ears of the fugitive Texan, and long before his chief enemy gave utterance to that vow, Eugene Cannon felt that Providence had not utterly deserted him in his hour of need.

He heard the Rustlers bustling about in the open space below his hiding-place, and as the first scent of smoke came to his sensitive nostrils, he had no other fear than that its pungent odor might cause him to sneeze.

He heard feet skuffling along the hard flooring of beaten earth, and while he tried to recall what he had seen of the lower portion before climbing into the ruined tower, he kept watch and ward over the only space where an enemy could climb up to his level. He did not really anticipate any such move, after all he had heard, but it could do no harm to be cautious.

Then a harsh cry rung out, and confusion seemed to overtake the Rustlers in the apartment below. Cries, curses, heavy trampling and—an abundance of acrid smoke!

"Thousand devils!" hoarsely cried Don Melchoir, beating a retreat while adding: "Out, men, and let it burn! 'Tis naught but grass, and a little smoke cannot injure the bats! Outside, and—"

His voice was lost in that roaring, crackling sound, and as the black smoke came upward in clouds, Eugene crept closer to the spot marking the destroyed stairway, but unable to do more than cast a single glance downward.

That one look was enough. He saw the red glare of flames, and while it did not seem possible for a flash of mere grass and dry twigs to work any material harm to those ruins, nearly all the woodwork having been burnt away already, that stifling smoke gave him great uneasiness.

It poured in black clouds up through the opening left by the fallen stairs, crossing the room where Eugene had sought refuge, to finally flow through the narrow window to which allusion has already been made.

If that was all, Cannon might have endured it, by lying close to the floor, against the opposite wall, but the smoke came up faster than it could escape through the window, and even this his lungs were soon beginning to revolt against.

Not a sound came from below, to denote that his enemies were making any attempt to extinguish the fire. He hardly expected they would, after the words shouted forth by Don Melchoir, but—why so silent? Why did he not hear them cursing or discussing the accident?

Was it an accident? Had Don Melchoir been so completely thrown off the scent as his words would seem to prove? Or—was this a cunningly contrived trap?

Eugene shivered with mingled fear and rage.

as that dread suspicion flashed across his mind. It was hard to think as much, yet—was it not still more difficult of belief that all the rest could have happened?

The young rancher crept across the room to the window, pressing his face close to the floor, and clearing his lungs as best he could, then, revolvers in hand and ready for use, he peered out through the curve of smoke, looking for Don Melchoir or his men.

In vain. Not a living being could he see during those few seconds of holding his breath to avoid being strangled by the acrid smoke. If the Rustlers had fled from the tower—as they surely must—they were not visible from the window.

"Then—I can't stay here and live!" Cannon reasoned, after drawing back and seeking comparatively free breath just beneath that window. "If they sight me, I'm a gone goosel! But—if I could only get out and over to that little corner I sighted when coming up!"

If possible, the bitter, blinding, choking smoke came in still greater volumes, and little by little all breathing space was being taken up, and Eugene saw that unless he managed to escape in some method, and that in a very brief period of time, he would surely be suffocated.

His sole alternative to crawling through the window was leaping through the smoke to the ground floor. If he escaped serious injury in the fall, the Rustlers would almost surely discover him. So, gathering all his energies, he crept through the window, feeling for a crack in the wall with his toes, then working himself along until clear of the suffocating smoke.

He had proceeded thus for several feet, when the crack into which his right hand was thrust gave way, leaving him clinging to the wall with three members, and one of them a cripple! And then a voice cried:

"Hold, whelp of the blind spaniel! Stir hand or foot, and I'll pin thee to yon wall with a bullet!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BULLET WELL SPED.

ONLY one being in the wide world could own that voice: so full of demoniac hatred, of pitiless revenge, of heartless malice.

At the first word Eugene Cannon not only recognized the speaker, but the whole truth flashed upon his busy brain.

He knew that Don Melchoir Gayferos had tracked him to where Lota's horse lay dead beside the jaguar. Knew that he and his men had followed the trail he left of single foot and crutch, and fearing to attempt an ascent to the tower in the face of an armed and desperate fugitive, had played that grim comedy expressly to drive him forth to death or captivity.

All this flashed through Eugene Cannon's brain in that single instant before turning his head to discover his relentless enemy. And if he could have exacted life for life just then, how quickly would that bargain have been sealed!

He could just catch sight of Don Melchoir Gayferos kneeling behind a scraggy bush not more than two-score paces distant from the base of the ruined tower.

He saw that the Rustler was armed with a rifle, its barrel resting in a fork, its butt to his shoulder, his hand covering the trigger-guard, ready for an instantaneous shot in case of need.

That same hasty glance showed him several other figures, but too indistinctly for recognition, even if they had been among those noted while in the Black Jaguar's den.

Don Melchoir laughed shrilly as he caught sight of that haggard face turned his way, but his revenge was far too hot to permit him to dally, and he called forth, in harsh tones:

"Loosen your hold, dog of a Texan! Let go, and drop to earth!"

Instead, Eugene strove to secure another hold with his right hand before his left should give entirely out. His fingers went groping along through the swirling smoke, for his eyesight could avail him but little, so closely was he obliged to hug that wall.

"Drop, I say!" yelled Don Melchoir, viciously. "Drop, or I'll send a bullet through first one hand, then the other! I'll cripple you by inches, and give you a foretaste of—"

The spiteful crack of a rifle rung forth, and a well-spiced bullet crashed through the brain of—not Eugene Cannon, but Don Melchoir Gayferos!

"Round 'em up, boys!" shouted Maverick Mark, breaking cover as he swiftly worked the lever to his rifle, casting out the empty shell and sending a fresh cartridge into the chamber. "Hold fast, Eugene! You're all right, and these plugs are our meat!"

With yells of terror the Rustlers—only four, now that their present chief had fallen, instead of two dozen, as Don Melchoir had caused the young rancher to believe—turned in flight, but their day was past.

All of the Texans had witnessed the peril of young Cannon, and all of them had caught those brutal threats issued by Don Melchoir. So—rifle cracked, and targets fell, dead or dying!

"Help!" hoarsely cried Eugene Cannon, every

nerve tingling with that killing strain. "Help, or I'm a goner! I can't hold on any—"

"Hang fast, lad!" trumpeted Mark, his hands fully as busy as his tongue. "Never say die! Ten seconds longer and—this way, you fellows! Lively, now!"

He had torn the stout *serape* from the body of Don Melchoir, and running swiftly across to the ruined tower, he was already prepared to break the fall of his friend, in case his strength should give out before others could come to his assistance.

"I'll do it, but, it's worse than pulling teeth!" panted the young rancher, unable to find a hold for even a single finger of his right hand, and still further weakened by his injured leg and foot.

"Just a few seconds more, pardner!" came that encouraging voice. "Grab hold, you fellows! Steady, so! All eyes upward, and shift to suit as—all ready, pardner! Come and see us!"

Eugene tried to push himself far enough away from the wall to clear all inequalities below him, and succeeded so well that he struck squarely in the center of the stout *serape*, held at each corner by strong hands. He rebounded, slightly, to be caught in the arms of the Man from Nowhere, who gave him a joyous hug as he cut a pigeon-wing before placing the young rancher on his own footing.

"All down! but, that devil didn't hurt ye, boy?"

"No," faintly muttered Eugene, turning faint and ill with all he had undergone. "Don't mind. I'm all right, only, where's father? He must—save her—save Eloise, before—"

Mark was kneeling at his side, but, as he saw that young Cannon had actually fainted, he swiftly lowered his head, calling for his men to fetch water.

Even as he did this, a sharp cry drew his eyes to the not distant chaparral, and he saw Colonel Cannon just breaking cover, pistol in hand and menacing a tall figure which he was urging along before him.

"Good glory! the Black Jaguar and—here, Dan! Squat and hold Cannon across your lap while—keep his head lowest—so!"

Mark knew there was no actual danger to be feared for Eugene, since his hasty examination had revealed no serious wounds. And, such being the case, he did not scruple to shift the burden upon another, then hastened forward to intercept Colonel Cannon and spare him all save a joyous shock.

"What drove you forth, colonel?" he cried, as he advanced to meet Black Jaguar and her guard. "Is this an example for a veteran to set raw recruits? Do you ache for a court-martial?"

"I couldn't stay behind when I saw the smoke, and feared—who is that, yonder?" his deep-lined face seeming more haggard than ever as he pointed toward the cowboy who was caring for Eugene.

"One who hasn't been hurt in the least, colonel," assured the Man from Nowhere, moving as though by accident so as to cut off further view for the instant. "He's just tired, and a bit dizzy from smoke; on my word as a Texan, he'll be all right inside of five minutes more."

"Is it—Tell me, or I'll go see for myself!"

"It's Eugene, colonel, that's a glad fact," laughed Mark, stepping aside and permitting the ranch-owner to rush past.

"Not dead?" muttered Black Jaguar, in strange tones, drawing the Texan's attention her way by pushing him with a shoulder, her arms being bound behind her back. "He isn't dead, señor?"

"Don't you wish I'd lie, and tell you yes, Carlita Quesado?" retorted the prairie free lance, glad to at last catch her tripping. "I thought you didn't understand white man's lingo, Black Jaguar?"

"Nor do I, when I see good reasons for being ignorant," with admirable coolness, her glittering eyes roving over the scene, to finally settle on the motionless figure of Don Melchoir Gayferos, whose evil career had been cut short by that shot, just in the nick of time.

"Then you admit that you are, what I know—the Black Jaguar?"

"I admit nothing, señor," once more falling back upon the Spanish.

"All right," with a careless shrug of his broad shoulders. "I say, pardner!"

"On deck, Maverick!"

"Just step this way, will you?" then adding, as the cowboy drew nearer: "You're a bit of a dandy, pard, and it ought to come easy for you to act as escort to a fine lady, even though she sees fit to don the forked articles. So, just see that she don't hurt herself, will you, pardner?"

"I'll take mighty good keer she don't hurt nobody else, anyway," grinned the cowboy, significantly, as he assumed charge, leaving Mark free to pass across to where Colonel Cannon was working to bring back the senses of his son.

"I didn't lie to you, colonel," observed Maverick, as he saw those heavy lids begin to quiver with back-coming consciousness. "He's got a lame leg, I reckon, from the looks, but—How goes it, pardner?"

"Eugene, my boy!" brokenly uttered the colonel, bending over that yet unconscious form. "Don't you know me? Don't you hear who's talking to you, lad?"

"You bet he does!" with a laugh of relief, as the young rancher not only opened his eyes, but called his father by name!

Meanwhile, the Black Jaguar was eying that motionless figure by the scraggy bush with an interest almost painful to witness. She tried to edge that way without her guard's knowledge, but, when he checked her, she frankly asked, in English:

"Take me to it, then, sir. I believe 'tis the body of a very dear friend, and—may I go see?"

"If it's a pard o' yours, old lady, I don't mind takin' ye that fur," was the prompt response. "Mebbe the sight 'll help pay some o' the grudges we Texans owe you an' your nasty gang. Come along, then!"

Carlita Quesado gazed intently into that upturned face, now robbed of all its beauty by the hole just over the eyes where the lead had torn its way forth. Then she cried aloud in jeering tones:

"Creed Cannon, come and gaze upon your eldest son—a corpse!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MAVERICK MARK'S ROUND-UP.

At the call of that exultant voice, Colonel Cannon gave a start, and his swaying figure would have fallen to the earth only for the swift clutch of Maverick Mark, who muttered:

"Don't believe her, colonel! She's all lies, except what's venom!"

"My boy—my Willard!" huskily cried the veteran, rallying his physical powers in part, and insisting on obeying that vicious summons.

"Don't let her see that it's biting you, colonel, or she'll never let up lying," warningly whispered Maverick, as he bore the old soldier company across the level to where lay the corpse of Don Melchoir.

Carlita Quesado was waiting their coming, her dark visage lighted up by an unholy fire. If she was not drinking deeply of vengeance, then she proved herself a most finished actress.

"Talk white, old lady, or you'll be the sufferer," bluntly warned the Man from Nowhere as they drew near to the spot where the Black Jaguar stood, pointing dramatically down at that bullet-marred face.

"Peace, whelp without name or pedigree!" sternly cried the woman, but fixing her burning gaze upon the face of the rancher. "And you, Creed Cannon, draw nearer. Clear your eyes and let them rest upon the face of—your eldest son!"

"You lie, devil! This is not my boy!"

"I speak the truth, Creed Cannon, and who should know better than I? Who stole the child from your blazing roof-tree? Who cared for him, as a cat will sometimes care for the baby rabbit she has caught? Who watched over, trained, taught, warped that bright brain? Who made the father become an object of undying hatred to the son? Who drew him on to love and win the love in return from—his own sister?"

Colonel Cannon lifted his clinched hands, and only the strongest effort of will kept him from striking those mocking lips.

"You lie! Every word that passes your vile lips is a lie! This is not my son, and—"

"This is your son, Willard. And, as you behold him now, just so shall he haunt your dreams from now until Satan claims his own, and bears you away to join your whelp in Tophet! Look! see where the lead tore through his handsome brow! See where—"

"Thou liest, Black Jaguar!" cried a hoarse, yet unsteady voice, from where a cowboy was kneeling by the side of one of the Rustlers.

"What's up, Tampkin?" called out Mark, springing that way.

"A Greaser says that woman lies, boss."

"'Tis my boy—the son she bade me never own, lest her foul plans miscarry!" huskily panted the wounded man, and Mark gave a chuckle of pure delight.

"Hurrah, colonel!" he cried, springing to his feet and hurrying back to where the Black Jaguar was still mocking her enemy. "It's all coming our way, at last! And you—Come along, old lady! See if you can face down a dying man!"

Manuel Gayferos, as the dying Rustler proclaimed his real name, no longer standing in awe of the fierce Black Jaguar, since he knew that his death was but the question of a few minutes at most, positively denied what Carlita Quesado had declared: Don Melchoir Gayferos was not the stolen child of Colonel Creed Cannon, but a native born Mexican, and the son of him who was now bearing witness.

Carlita Quesado denied his words, of course, sticking firmly to the line she had marked out; but Mark knew she was lying, and the colonel tried hard not to believe her.

And then, promising Manuel Gayferos decent burial for himself and his now acknowledged son, Mark questioned him concerning the Black Jaguar's Den, gleaned enough from the dying

man to feel still more confident that their runaway guide had told them true.

While this was going on, the cowboys had extinguished the fire in the ruined tower, lest the black smoke attract other parties to the spot, while one of their number, who was an expert in caring for bruises and sprains, paid particular attention to Eugene's injured leg.

This was soon made so comfortable that the young rancher declared himself well able to join in the rescuing efforts which were to be set in motion with the least possible delay.

Maverick Mark questioned him closely about the valley and the best method of entering it without prematurely alarming the Rustlers, then comparing the three accounts with strict impartiality.

"Well, you can't exactly call it a lead-pipe cinch," he admitted, with characteristic frankness, when father and son asked him for his opinion. "Still, I reckon, we can make the rifle without much danger of harm touching the young lady."

"Or either of them!" almost doggedly muttered Eugene. "But for Lota Quesado, I'd never be here now! But for her, we'd never find Eloise in safety when we do get there! So I'll kill the man who harms that girl, if it's my last act on earth!"

"I thank you, sir," said Carlita Quesado, her voice sounding softer, more gentle than any then present had ever known it before. "Do with me as you will, but spare my child. She is pure and innocent! She has never wronged you, and for her sake—spare her, and I will yield all else! I will guide you to the Den, and swear that all shall enter without a shot being fired!"

"You are too mighty kind, old lady!" averred Mark. "And just a trifle too late, as well. We've got the key to both front and back doors, don't you see?"

He refused further parley, sending Carlita aside under guard, then hastening their preparations for taking the road. But, busily as he worked, his mind was far from being at ease.

If Lota was really Carlita's own child, would she have admitted as much? Would she not have sought to deny that relationship, lest her deeply-injured enemies seek to in part revenge themselves on that child? And if not—

"It'll hit the lad terribly hard, I'm thinking! He may find a sister, but will that pay him for losing a sweetheart?"

Still, Maverick Mark kept these uncomfortable reflections to himself, and by the time breath failed Manuel Gayferos, a grave sufficiently large to contain both himself and son, Melchoir, was in readiness. This completed the work necessary to be done in that quarter, and the sun was still quite a distance above the horizon when the party of Texans, with Carlita Quesado riding in their midst, took up their course for the Den of the Black Jaguar and her cubs.

While riding along, with scouts thrown out ahead and on both flanks, Mark briefly but clearly explained the conclusion he had arrived at and the surest method of making his round-up a complete success.

That was to divide their force, sending the main body around to block the mouth of the valley, while a selected squad should leave their animals and cross the range afoot, to kill or capture the sentinel always stationed in the narrow pass.

This done, they could easily reach the cabin where Eloise had been left in confinement by a rush if discovered by the enemy, or by creeping should they be so fortunate as to escape observation so long.

"Either way we're bound to bag the whole gang, and do it so mighty slick that they'll hardly remember they tote guns before the circus is over and the round-up complete!"

It sounded marvelously easy, but—

"What are we to do with this hag?" asked the colonel.

"Use her as a decoy duck. Gag her jaws, leave her tied fast in the saddle, range the boys with Greaser rigging next to her, then bluff the guards in front of the valley. Isn't that clear enough?"

It seemed more than feasible, and no objections were raised or improvements suggested when, nearing the horse-shoe range, Mark gave the signal for division.

He placed Colonel Cannon in charge of the party bound for the front and gravely cautioned him against letting Carlita Quesado in any manner give him the slip.

"She's all poison, though she now looks and acts so broken down, colonel. Just now's the very time you want to suspect her the hardest. But I don't reckon she can do any real injury so long as you keep her jaws in limbo. So, git thar, colonel!"

Despite his injured foot and leg, Eugene insisted on being one of the squad picked by Mark to scale the ridge and enter the Den from the rear. And, as he alone had been over the ground before, the Man from Nowhere was quite willing to accept him as a volunteer.

Thanks to Mark's strong arm, Eugene found no insurmountable difficulty, and in what they deemed good time the little squad reached the

crest, pausing there to catch breath and to view the valley below.

It lay in seeming peace, with only one or two fires glowing here and there, though the moonlight promised all the aid required by the rescuing party. And having taken this view, Mark was on the point of leading his men down the narrow trail to secure the guard, when, coming from beyond the mouth of the valley, a wild, shrill, penetrating yell rung forth upon the night-air.

It was the yell of the Black Jaguar to her cubs!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MAVERICK MARK'S RICH REWARD.

WITH that yell, the clatter of iron-shod hoofs could be distinguished; then the rapid cracking of firearms drowned both!

"Forward!" snarled Mark, himself dashing at reckless speed down the narrow pass, intent only on reaching the guard and overcoming him before he could add aught to that wild alarm.

He knew, without saying, what had happened. Carlita Quesado, with all her seeming resignation to fate, had managed to deceive Colonel Cannon, and slipped her gag, at least sufficiently to permit her to give that shrill yell of warning and alarm, both in one.

He knew, too, that she had sent her horse ahead in desperate flight, but he could only hope that those rapid shots had found a target.

Mark caught sight of a dusky shape outlined against the bare rocks just ahead, and leaped forward, striking as he came, that clubbed pistol sending the guard down in a limp and shivering heap, unable even to groan above his breath.

"Close in, lads!" the Man from Nowhere ordered, plunging onward and downward, hoping to gain the cabins, in one of which Eloise Thornton surely must be found, before the Rustlers could rally to make anything like a concerted resistance. "When you see a head that don't belch forth pure Texan, down it for keeps! We've got to round-up, or be rounded!"

That recently so quiet and peaceful valley was already a pandemonium, so far as noise was concerned. The Rustlers had been taken completely by surprise, long immunity from attack in that Den causing them to trust implicitly to their sentinels both in front and rear. And now that they were assailed, lacking a leader, they could do little but try to escape, fighting only when retreat was cut off.

Not a sound had come from Pablo Acosta, though he was their present chief, and, lacking a head, when the Rustlers found themselves fairly surrounded, the darkness multiplying their enemies ten-fold, they threw down their weapons and begged for quarter.

This was granted, for already Eugene and his father had found and set Eloise free. But Mark took care that no long chances were run, holding the Rustlers under cover of rifles while another squad bound them, hand and foot.

This done, Mark sought out his friends, smiling as he saw Eugene and Lota close together, but passing them by to whisper a few words to the colonel, who immediately followed the Man from Nowhere across the valley to where the body of Carlita Quesado was lying.

Death had overtaken the terrible Black Jaguar at last, and if Colonel Cannon felt any regret over her fate, it was because she had passed away without clearing up the mystery of his two lost children.

"I gave the word to fire, when she broke away with that scream," he muttered, as he gazed upon the form of the one who had caused him so much pain and torture, both of body and of mind. "I even sent a couple of shots after her myself! But, I'd give a hand to have learned all those lips might have told before death sealed them!"

"It don't look just right, does it?" asked the Man from Nowhere, at the same time touching Cannon on an arm and motioning him to follow elsewhere. "But, I believe all things are ordered for the best, colonel, take matters as they run. And so, maybe you'll learn the truth from other lips, while hers would surely have lied to you up to their very last gasp!"

"You mean?"

"That this is our night, colonel! That I've got a fellow over here, who can tell you pretty much all you care to know!"

Five minutes later Creed Cannon was kneeling by the side of Pablo Acosta, who lay very near the point of death, stricken down by one of those wild shots sent after the Black Jaguar when she broke away with that warning cry to rouse her cubs!

Space forbids a literal record of the story Pablo Acosta told, for he had much to say, and could only do so with frequent pauses for rest. His strength was kept up by whisky, and he told all that Colonel Cannon cared to learn.

Carlita Quesado had intended to carry out the fiendish plan she laid before her enemy, at Hand-cuff Ranch, that night, but fate interposed. The stolen children sickened and died, of smallpox, less than six months after their abduction. Carlita, in hopes that the parents would catch the disease, confined the remains, after a long period of brooding over her best

method of seeking revenge, and contrived to leave the ghastly package at Cannon's door.

As time passed on, and she learned that her sworn enemy was still alive and prospering, her vendetta took its old shape, but with her own daughter, and the son of an old follower, as the dead children.

Pablo softened her evil deeds as much as possible, but at the very best Carlita Quesado stood out as a marvel of evil. He swore her brain had been turned by the death of her twin brother, Seraphin Quesado, and it is more than probable he was right in so declaring.

Carlita meant to strip Cannon of all his wealth, by making use of Lota and Melchoir, whom he was to be made believe were his own children.

Then came the capture of Eugene, and signs that Lota was beginning to feel more than ordinary friendship for the handsome young rancher. Whether this would have worked any change in the Black Jaguar's plans, Pablo could not say, though he thought likely. But now—

"Take me to her corpse, señors," he gasped, huskily. "Let me see her face once more before death comes to close my eyes! I loved her—loved her as never mortal man loved weak woman before!"

His wish was gratified. He drew his latest breath beside Carlita Quesado, and they were consigned to the same grave.

Before that end came, Lota was brought to his side, and Pablo kissed the cross as he swore that no tie of blood lay between herself and Eugene Cannon. She was the child of Carlita Quesado and a father, long since dead, but whose union with her mother had received the blessing of the church, in which the record, together with that of her birth, could readily be found if needed.

Carlita Quesado and Pablo Acosta were given decent burial. The other dead were hastily covered over. The captured Rustlers were left in bonds, to work their way out of their own accord, or to be set free by any of their fellows who might chance that way before they could regain their own liberty.

Lota, thanks to the coaxing of Eloise, and a few ardent whispers from Eugene, consented to accompany the Texans when they rode away from the Black Jaguar's Den.

With so strong a force, there was little danger to be apprehended, now that their object was gained and Maverick Mark's Round-up was an accomplished fact; but the company pressed on as rapidly as their horses could carry them without running the risk of a break-down. They had a mount for each person, selected from the Rustlers' stock of horses, and changes were frequently made.

It was a hard ride, but Lota, at least, found in it a blessing. It prevented her from indulging too much in gloomy thought, and when the Rio Grande was safely crossed, she had in a measure regained her usual peace of mind. Just how much of this was attributable to Eugene Cannon, may be left to the reader.

Hand-cuff Ranch was reached in safety, and once there, Maverick Mark was urged to become a fixture. He held out against both the colonel and Eugene, but when Eloise added her plea—Well, the Man from Nowhere would have been no man at all, had he not surrendered!

And his last plea—that he had no name to bestow upon his wife, should he be fortunate enough to win one—was met by Colonel Cannon legally adopting him as a son, giving him that name, and thus winning a son and a daughter to take the places of those he had lost through the Black Jaguar's Vendetta!

For, of course, Mark married Eloise, as Eugene did Lota.

Maverick Mark never learned his true parentage, but he no longer sought to solve the mystery of the past. Why should he? He had a father, a brother, a sister, a lovely and loving wife—most valuable of all!

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